D.CURTIS
1913.

"Stand back," she said. Chapter XIII

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# The CONCESSION HUNTERS

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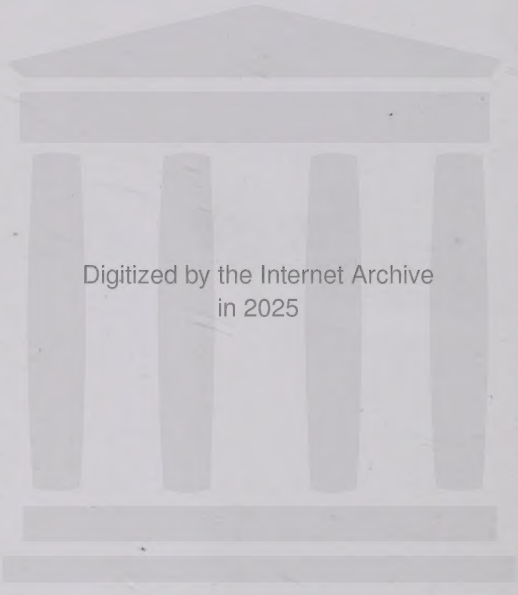
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# THE CONCESSION-HUNTERS

## I

### THE LAUNCH REPAIRER

It was an oppressive day, and no breath of air stirred under the brassy heavens, when piling up the muddy current beneath her ample bows the R.M.S. *Barcana* steamed into the mouth of a West African river. Startled by the boom of her mail gun, a cloud of huge bats whirled blindly along the edge of the cottonwood forest, then vanished to hide in its dim recesses until darkness brought relief from the pitiless day, and when the engines stopped a canoe slid off from a limewashed factory dazzlingly white among the motionless palm-tufts ashore. The coloured postal clerk it brought on board signed with due solemnity a receipt for a bag with many seals which concealed a small handful of letters among its folds, and two white men climbed down into his unstable craft beneath the gangway.

"This be the Royal mail, sah. Why for you not wait the factory boat?" he asked, descending in turn.

"I'm in a hurry, Montmorency, and I'll take the chances of the Royal mail drowning me," said the young factory assistant who had come round from the next river. "Sit down carefully, Cummings, before that grinning image upsets the whole conveyance. You can go ahead with your oil tank as soon as we're clear of the screw. As to the factory boat, I shouldn't wonder if the agent didn't send it because he's dead by now. Don't get excited, Montmorency, or you'll turn over the canoe. Cummings, it's a fantastic country you have come to."

Two muscular negroes, naked save for a waist-cloth, dipped the paddles, and the steamer's black length sliding past the canoe was hidden presently by the forest as she steamed on through a labyrinth of waterways to land gin cases and Manchester cotton here and there among the isolated factories. Meanwhile the new arrival nonchalantly surveyed the scene before him. On either side of the flaming water the ebbing tide left bare a belt of black mire, which looked like treacle and smelt worse than a sewer. Behind the mangroves fringing it there was only forest streaked in places by grey vapour, and had he travelled four hundred miles from West to East he would have found much the same prospect, for this was the great swamp pierced by the Oil rivers, through part of which the Niger finds its way to the sea. There was no mistaking the fact that his companion had spent several years in that region, for though he looked little more than twenty his face was worn thin by sickness, and his very jocularity would have grated upon any one of sensitive temperament. There was no mirth in it, and it suggested that the youth had learned too soon the oil traders' hopeless philosophy—eat, drink and be merry, for to-morrow we die.

Wilkinson glanced in turn at Cummings, who, dressed in white duck with double-crowned felt hat, lounged in the stern. He was a burly, bull-necked man, with recklessness stamped upon his square-jawed visage, and ingrained hands which showed that he followed a mechanical profession. As a matter of fact, he had been a marine engineer, but a fiery temper and impatience of control, coupled with a weakness for alcohol, had several times reduced him to the position of journeyman fitter. Still, his vagaries were usually of an heroic order, and there were many men in odd corners of the world who had profited by his free-handed generosity. Alexander Cummings was neither a refined nor a saintly character, but he never turned aside a hairsbreadth to avoid either an unfortunate friend or a powerful enemy; and, strange to say, it has often been such as he, the irresponsible, all-daring sinners, who have initiated changes in West African history. Where Government official, scientific explorer, and capitalist's servant have followed and finished, the unknown,

and sometimes rascally, adventurer has usually pointed the way. Had Cummings been more conventional or tractable it is probable that fate would not have selected him to effect changes in several more worthy persons' life story.

"It doesn't look much from the outside, but I have seen worse places," he said, when trading clerk Wilkinson repeated his observation. "The windward coasts of this country, Brazil, and other haunts of the fever devils beside the Chagres and Panama. What was I doing there, sonny?—running a steam navvy until a Dago tried to slip a knife into me. He would have done it, too, but that I got him first with a heavy spanner, see?"

Wilkinson noticed a sonorous roll of the "r's" which indicated a North British origin, but otherwise his companion's colloquialism was rather American. "What was your occupation in West Africa?" he asked.

"Second in a light-draught steamer chartered by a French syndicate. Geordie, chief, used to Cleveland iron, thought he could teach me, and we had a difference when I wouldn't let him thump the life out of the good engines. They were built by the folks at Fairfield who taught me, but when I'd convinced him with a lump of coal the old man fired me. It took their whole company to put me off the ship."

"You have peculiar antecedents for a missionaries' assistant," said Wilkinson with a grin; and Cummings answered grimly, "When a man's down to his last shilling he'll take up anything, though I misdoubt from what I hear they're instilling a pernicious doctrine into the heathen. Still, if I find I can't conscientiously serve them I've always got these ten fingers, and Africa is a big country."

Wilkinson chuckled. The fact that this disreputable free-lance should have compunctions about assisting the Reverend Hilary Legh struck him as irresistible, but the hands the mechanic displayed were ponderous, and checking his merriment he answered, "I'm afraid the post will hardly suit you. No smoking in your hammock, no chasing niggers round with a stick—all men are free and equal under the Reverend Hilary—and, worst of all, no whisky."

"We'll see," said the new arrival quietly.

The smile faded from Wilkinson's face, and pointing to a strip of sand half-seen through openings in the mangrove withes, he said, "Run the Royal mail in as near as you can, Montmorency, and tell your boys to take this baggage on to the missionary man's. I won't delay you long, and a little walk will give you an appetite, Cummings."

The postal clerk waved his hand to the sable paddlers, and presently Cummings stepped gingerly ashore into thick black mud which closed over his pipeclayed shoes; then, following Wilkinson over a network of mangrove tentacles and under the drooping fronds of palms, he reached a narrow avenue where he halted, asking, "Where is it you are taking me?"

"To the place where most of us find permanent quarters," was the dry answer. "There are five living white men in Silvertown, and you can see how many crosses there are yonder. I'm rather afraid it's my chief they're burying."

Cummings shrugged his broad shoulders, pushed on a few paces, and then sat down staring about him with not unnatural curiosity. Two sickly white men stood bare-headed in the thin shade of the palm fronds, and another in snowy surplice which apparently emitted light on a trampled strip of hot white sand. He was tall, gaunt, and emaciated, with the face of an ascetic, and read clearly from a book, whose brass clasps flashed blindingly, in a voice which commanded respect for his message. Cummings regarded him suspiciously, for he had met such men before, and though he seldom troubled himself about matters spiritual, had inherited a prejudice against that particular type of zealot. He also noticed that the worn face was a strong one, and was pleased. He considered it quite possible there might be strife between himself and the preacher, and he preferred a staunch adversary.

A rough deal case, one of those in which the means of murder are sold the bushmen in the shape of flintlock guns, lay at the reader's feet. A lizard sat upon it, and close by two naked aliens were bailing muddy water out of a shallow trench, the clank of their buckets jarring through the missionary's annunciation of an eternal hope

beyond the power of most men to cling to in that land of shadow. Cummings was not an imaginative person or he might have found an appropriate symbol in the sheen of stainless lilies which spring in the night out of foul corruption, gemming the edge of the forest. Instead, he growled at Wilkinson for bringing him there, and waiting until a loathsome sand crab sidled up to look for a weak place in his shoe squelched it savagely.

The reader beckoned, the negroes tilted the gun case into the hole, and stood upon it knee-deep in water as they clawed down the sand, while the hollow splashing drowned most of what followed, and one materialistic listener returned to the belief he had almost been shaken out of that the powers supreme in modern days are those of steel and steam. The reader, closing his book, stood a few moments breathless looking down at the growing heap of sand. He had been tried by the worst climate in the world, and was exhausted by his task.

Wilkinson beckoned Cummings forward, and said, "This is your engineer, sir. Mr. Cummings — the Reverend Hilary Legh. Now I've done my duty, and you will excuse me. It's my late chief they've just covered in, and, barring a natural shortness of temper, he was a good friend to me. Sorry to land you right into the midst of this, but it's our commonest function, and one may just as well get used to it at the beginning."

Wilkinson coughed with somewhat unnecessary vigour, and hurried away, for though he had condensed the tragic experiences of a lifetime into a few years he was young still, while the missionary stretched out his hand to Cummings frankly. "I am glad to see you, and could have wished you a more cheerful welcome," he said. "Will you walk back to the station with me?"

They turned into a winding trail between giant buttressed cottonwoods, each garlanded with ropes of hanging creepers, and Cummings sniffed the mingled savours forming the smell of tropical Africa which once breathed is never forgotten—steaming earth, raw odours of exuding sap, fragrance of lilies, emanations of slime that festers, and sourness of decay. Then, as they paced through the cool green shadow that was a merciful relief to his dazzled

eyes, the missionary answering a question narrated the history of the fallen trader.

"He came out a very young man, and served many years in one of the Amalgamated factories. I understand his constitution was fever proof at first. During that time he saved some money, and I had just arrived here when he set up an independent factory. A powerful combination managed to bar him from the best oil markets, and he went home ruined inside twelve months, sought work, and failed to find it, and was almost starving when Halton sent him out to manage his smallest factory. Trouble had, however, set its mark upon the poor fellow, and now he sickened with fever like the rest of us. It is, unfortunately, not an uncommon story," and Legh sighed before he added, with apparent irrelevance, "I trust you are an abstainer, Mr. Cummings."

Cummings was a man of impulse, and whatever moved his pity for some reason also stirred his wrath, so he answered bluntly, "I abstain from liquor just when I can't get it. In the words of the chanty, I drink whisky when I can. Sweated, scraped, and stinted himself for years in this forsaken hole !—and that was the end of it."

"Then," said the missionary, turning towards him. "You take upon yourself a heavy responsibility. And it was not the end, only the beginning. The career of that man was not a series of accidents, but from each incident in it something resulted which will have its influence for good or ill here on these rivers in years to come."

"The beginning ! I can't see so far. Will you tell me what you look for ?"

Hilary Legh glanced at the speaker, and Cummings met his gaze. Though of widely varying type, there was a likeness as well as a difference in their faces. This might have been due to the steadiness of their eyes or the stamp of fearlessness, for both held their lives lightly, and had risked them often at a dangerous task. Those of the one who had more than once crawled through scalding steam and under thrashing steel to master the runaway machinery were bloodshot and sensual. Those of the other who had grappled with the horrors of loneliness and fever in a land which was full of devils, its sable inhabitants said, were

deep sunk in shadowed hollows, but they sparkled as, turning his thin face towards the east, he took up the mechanic's challenge. He was of enthusiastic nature, and had been stirred by his late duty. For a background there was forest throbbing with exuberant life that changed suddenly to decay, tangled lianas sucking the sap which fed them from the boughs they stifled, lilies nourished by the decomposition of leaves scarcely dead, and orchids clothing mouldering branches which a few weeks earlier had been living wood. It was all appropriate.

"I look for the resurrection of the dead—and here the dawn of a new era, when modern science awakening to its responsibilities has limited the inroads of disease. I shall not see it, but it will surely come, generated even in the mire of many failures—a reign of equal justice between white men and black who will own other laws than those of supply and demand, and cease to strangle each other's commerce on every opportunity, when gin cases and kegs of powder shall no longer be poured in by the million, or the blood of the helpless flow like water in the bush. It is slow in coming, we have waited long, but even avarice and chicanery are working to that end, and the man I buried played his part in a scheme which is evolving order out of what is not the chaos of savagery and bloodshed it seems."

Cummings made no answer. When sufficiently sober, few men were more capable of reducing to order chaotic machinery, but he knew his limits. Then, putting off the mantle of the prophet, his companion became a kindly gentleman. "In the meantime we have both of us our daily work to do, and I hope we shall make you comfortable at the station," he said. "If you run short of anything you will please let us know. We ourselves live very plainly, but we like to meet the wishes of our guests."

Cummings, who duly noticed the word was guest and not servant, straightway registered one or two good resolutions, which he did not keep, as he plodded on towards the mission station. It consisted of an earth-built, palm-thatched church, a commodious wooden edifice roofed with galvanised iron, and two rows of neat huts

lining a square hewn out of the cottonwoods. Here he was duly introduced to the Reverend Peter Johnston, a somewhat portly little man whose blue eyes had a keen twinkle, and who, Cummings fancied, possessed less zeal and more knowledge of worldly things than his companion. Neither of the pair, however, was permanently stationed there.

He slept soundly, and next morning commenced his task on the partly wrecked machinery of a launch, which, because the river is the only road in that country, the good missionaries had brought out at much expense, and foolishly entrusted to a sable blacksmith. Cummings' good resolutions went overboard when he surveyed her engines and discovered the result of the black man's experiments, while the air about him grew sulphurous. Also he found it necessary to drop the dusky mechanic into the river to soothe his feelings, and chastise another with a spanner. When Missionary Johnston came to see how he was progressing, he discovered the engineer working grimed with rust and soot, and almost naked to the waist, in a fit of baresark rage, while two sable aliens, whose persons bore the marks of his fist, flung clods at him from a safe distance.

"Dear me!" said the horrified spectator. "Mr. Cummings, what is the meaning of this? You seem to be in difficulties, but really that is hardly the way to set an example to our coloured brother."

"This is the result of trusting good engines to a converted nigger," said Cummings, straightening his back. "No half-tamed coloured impostor is a brother of mine, and, as you ought to know, no nigger will ever work unless you force him to. I've been painfully trying to do so."

Johnston screwed his face up, as one who hears an unpalatable truth which he will not admit but cannot deny, and was about to board the launch when Cummings stopped him. "I must insist on seeing what is wrong," said the former. "May I remind you that the craft belongs to this station, and we brought you out—at considerable expense—to repair her and the other?"

"Just so! I'm going to do it, but no missionary in Africa can teach me my business. In any case, you go

back to your preaching, and leave me to worry through in the way that suits me."

The mechanic's thick neck was swollen, his great square face flushed, and Johnston retired gracefully, while hardly had he left the bank than Cummings made a dash towards a charcoal fire upon it, and there was a howl from the negro stoker he laid his hands upon.

"Look at this!" he roared, holding aloft a brass valve-spindle which had run into a shapeless strip of metal. "I told yon benighted heathen to burn it clear of grease, and he has pretty well melted the end right off. You won't take telling, Sambo; then into the river you go. Get out, you blame wastrels, before I'm the death of you."

The negro, who was almost naked, twisted himself from the white man's grasp, and when Cummings, after hurling a billet at him, stood erect with the perspiration dripping off him, savagely vociferous, the missionary departed in the wake of the black men, who fled howling through the bush. On his way he chanced upon Wilkinson, who, having met mechanics of that species before, guessed at the cause of the tumult, and asked innocently, "How do you like your new engineer, sir?"

"The man is a savage. He will bring disgrace upon us," said the Reverend Peter Johnston, choking with suppressed fury.

Stopping neither to eat nor to drink, Cummings worked on until sunset, then returned to the station in high dudgeon, tried to inveigle the Reverend Hilary into a theological argument, and failing in this retired to the verandah, where he solaced himself by singing fantastic songs of doubtful moral tone to the twanging of a dilapidated banjo. By degrees, because all negroes are fond of music, the inhabitants of the station assembling danced unlawful heathen dances in the moonlight below, until Johnston rebuked them sternly. The Reverend Hilary also sought the musician saying, "I am afraid I must ask you to put the instrument away. We trust our guests not to tempt its occupants to break this station's rules. I hope you will see the fairness of this and not force me to——"

Cummings slammed the banjo back into its case. "You

can stop at that. I came out under contract, free passage both ways, to repair the launches and remain any time up to twelve months if you wanted me. Well, I'm going to keep my part of the bargain, and until those engines are running no one in this distressful country could turn me out with a pikel. Plain enough, isn't it? Good-night to you!"

Hilary Legh left him, and rejoined his comrade, who said, "The Committee has saddled us with an Old Man of the Sea, and I can see no way of escape from the difficulty. If we dismissed him he evidently would not go, and it would cause a scandal if he sued the Committee. Meantime, what an opportunity for the enemy!—and there are so many who throw mud at us already."

This was correct, for few traders love the missionary, and about that time Wilkinson chuckled as he said to his comrade in the sweltering factory, "They have caught a Tartar up at the station, and I'm inclined to fancy the fun will be worth the watching. If they rub that man the wrong way there'll be desolation before they get rid of him."

For a month Cummings worked on fiercely, and Johnston kept out of earshot of his comments, then he found the surroundings grow monotonous, and seeking for relaxation boarded the *Barcana* on her homeward call at Silvertown, with the ostensible purpose of procuring bearing-metal. Whether he obtained it did not appear, but coming ashore at midnight escorted by several white men singing discordantly, he insisted upon showing a North British mechanic his work, and discovered that somebody had stolen a costly adjustable spanner.

"This is what comes of converting niggers," he exclaimed. "There's not another spanner like it in Africa, and now some woolly-headed image is going to use it for a palm-nut-cracker. But I'll pull the whole place down piecemeal until I find it."

"Then I'll leave ye til it. The contrack's no to my fancy," said the visitor with native prudence, and was half-way to the *Barcana* when a wild clamour announced that Cummings had commenced operations. About this time a trembling negro pounded on the door of the

Reverend Hilary's room. "Them white man dun gone mad, sah. He lib for pull all our house up by him root," he said.

Legh was dressed in five minutes, Johnston in ten, and they found the burly mechanic working methodically through the village, leaving ruin behind. Several huts lay piled in shapeless heaps, while Cummings, who swung a cottonwood limb like a battering-ram, was hard at work demolishing another, calling out as he did it, "I want my spanner, savvy, and I'm not going to let up until I get it."

"Be prudent. The man looks dangerous," said Johnston, but Legh, stepping forward, placed himself between the mass of timber which was slung by a rope from an overhanging branch, and the tottering hut. "Put that thing down," he said.

"Stand clear!" said Cummings. "I want my spanner. You'll be smashed flatter than a pancake if I let her go."

"I shall not move," and for a space there was silence, while wondering black men watched their master stand fearlessly before the balanced branch which would have justified Cummings' warning had he released it. Then the mechanic laughed and let it fall with a crash, saying, "You're a man of courage. It's almost a pleasure to oblige you."

"I don't ask for compliments," said Legh. "I think a night's sleep would be the best thing for you, and would request an interview, when you have recovered, to-morrow."

Cummings retired, and by degrees the hot stillness of the tropic night settled down upon river and forest, while next morning he descended unabashed to the interview. "I'll spare you explanations. It just comes to this. You're wanting to get rid of me, and now the first engines are finished I'm willing to go," he said. "You're bound to pay my passage back, but I'll waive my rights in return for a canoe and some cases of provisions and mineral waters, though I'd much rather have brandy. What am I going to do? Well, that's my own business, but I'll give you sound advice before I go. When things are going badly, and you get sick of this weary world, just set another Lagos black man to run that boiler and he'll find

you a quick passage to a better one. That's about all, but I hope we part friends, Mr. Legh."

The bargain was promptly made, and that afternoon Cummings sat on the factory verandah talking to Wilkinson. "I'm going right up the river into no man's land," he said. "There must be no end of little kings who use spears and guns, besides sultans in the dry country behind them where the sword-blades come from, and I'm going up to teach the fellows who forge the fine chain mail modern workshop practice, for a consideration."

"Don't be a complete idiot," answered Wilkinson. "It's hardly safe for a white man to venture twenty miles back from here except along the main river, and some of those bushmen will utilise you for a Ju-Ju sacrifice. Don't you know they're always killing each other? It's a perfectly impossible, ghastly country."

"All the better for me! I'll show them how to build stockades that can't be rushed and sort their guns so that they will go off, and it's possible you'll hear of a new white Emir. Other men have done such things, and they hadn't my advantages—I'm a first-class mechanic."

Wilkinson, who afterwards declared that Cummings was perfectly sober, could only reply, "You are a first-class lunatic," before the engineer descended the stairway.

It was late that night when the negro into whom Cummings had hammered some knowledge of the duties required of an assistant engineer was roused by a knocking on the door of his hut, and saw his master standing in the entrance.

"You're coming a trip up river," said the latter. "It isn't the least use kicking because you have just got to go, but I'll send you back with the launch in a few days, see? while if you try to raise an uproar I'll have to hurt you, savvy."

The negro saw no opening for escape, and with a heavy hand on his shoulder marched towards the launch which had steam up ready. Cummings slipping her moorings drew the starting lever, and with a soft bubbling about her the craft slid out into the stream. The explorer took with him one dusky fireman (who went very much against his will), three cases of provisions, and one of mineral

waters whose effervescence had evaporated, a ratchet brace of his own invention, besides other tools and a cheap revolver. It was not a comprehensive outfit, but he set out with it contented to try his fortune in one of the most savage regions of a barbarous continent. The venture was nevertheless not quite so hopeless as it appeared, for other men had gone inland at various times during four centuries with less, and though some perished mysteriously the extension of commerce into virgin territory in due time followed the sufferings of the rest.

In any case, Cummings showed as yet little fear of the unknown. His face was eager, and he looked forward up the misty river, listening to the throb of engines while the fever damp stood beaded on his hair and soaked his thin jacket, calmly confident in his own ability to make the best of whatever might befall. His experiences might not have been worth recording, but for the results which sprang from them.

## II

### THE HEADMAN'S ARMOURER

When dawn came suddenly it found Cummings half-asleep and drenched by dew, with his big right hand stiffened on the tiller. Ahead, the river was sheeted with ghostly mist, and all the swamps steamed like a cauldron until the red sun leapt up and another scorching day began. Then the mist rolled back as though it were a curtain revealing the dingy mangroves which stretched back into the distance on either hand, an endless sea of olive-green foliage above, a maze of white stems and slimy tentacles below. Yeasty brown water trickled sluggishly out of the noisome caverns beneath them, but in places there were banks of sloppy ooze, or strips of yellow sand that caught the sunlight and blinked dazzlingly.

Once a screaming parrot flashed athwart the river, and a wading stork croaked in answer, but afterwards there

was heavy silence—the silence that broods almost unbroken from sunrise to sunset over the dismal swamp belt behind the surf-hammered coast of Western Africa. The naked savage who breeds and fights and dies oppressed by many terrors in its eternal shadow hears in fancy the devils which the corruption breeds whispering through this hush. Some of them strike the wanderer dead with invisible spears, others wield the scourge of the fever and worse sicknesses, but all are malevolent and real enough, though the European knows them by other names—lassitude, causeless fear, despair, mental aberration, and stark madness.

Cummings, however, was fortunately not an imaginative person, and, though he had proved himself immune from fever in the narrow lands between the Pacific and the Gulf of Mexico, covered a small coin twice with quinine and absorbed it in company with a draught of the *Barcana's* whisky.

"Get more steam upon her, Bartholomew; I'm going to open her out," he said. "Here are three creeks ahead. Where does the least used one go to?"

The negro answered truthfully that the largest joined the main stream of the Niger in fifty miles or so, but that no civilised black man knew where the others led, except that it was into a country which anybody who valued his life would avoid. This decided Cummings, who said half-aloud, "There'll be very small pickings on the trail of the great monopoly, and I'll follow a smaller creek. Heads for the right; tails to the left."

The shilling he spun settled with the oak leaves uppermost, and Cummings wrenched upon the tiller accordingly. Apparently insignificant trifles play their part in history, and the fall of that shilling made a considerable difference in the future of several English families. All day, with throttle valve wide open and engines pounding hard, the launch swept on into the unknown, past leagues of rotting mire and the leaf-shrouded tunnels of countless waterways, while when twice again Cummings span his shilling the answer was—left. Then, as under the evanescent glare of a garish sunset, drier forest loomed up ahead, being tired of the cramped confinement of the

launch he landed and slung a hammock, requisitioned from the missionaries, between two trees ashore. He piled his provisions beneath it, and after a simple meal sank into peaceful slumber with a partly empty whisky bottle beside him. He had not the grasp of details which marks the born organiser, or he would have known better.

It was after midnight when the negro, who had travelled far enough into the devils' country and did not sleep, raised his head above the launch's coaming and inspected his self-constituted master. The white man snored with a serene regularity that jarred upon the swamp frogs' orchestra, and the negro crawling forward loosed the bow mooring from its timber-head. Thereupon the stream swung the craft slowly round, and the black man trembled as he strained his ears to listen. Still there was only the oily gurgle of water, strange frog choruses, and the heavy even snore. Feeling easier, he cast off the stern mooring too, started when it splashed into the water, and sat clutching the engine lever in an agony of fear, but Cummings neither spoke nor stirred. So the slow-moving current bore the craft away on its oily breast, ghostly palms and cottonwoods slid by, and when some minutes had passed the negro, opening the throttle, turned on full steam, and the little vessel raced back towards the main river. Either through an oversight or with deliberate malice, he had not loosed the painter of the canoe made fast astern.

The first sunrays that crept across the forest roused Cummings from fantastic dreams of overturning heathen dynasties by means of a flintlock mitrailleuse, and at first he stared about him drowsily with a vague impression that there was something missing. Then he leapt out of his hammock with a savage growl, "The brute has gone, and taken the canoe with him!"

A glance at the loose mooring lines explained how this had been done, and made it clear that he was left alone without visible means of locomotion in a particularly desolate corner of savage Africa, and the fact would have badly shaken many a white man's nerve. Cummings, however, was blessed with a profound contempt for any danger not immediately visible, and his action was

characteristic, for first he vituperated the deserter, then sat down on a provision case and filling a black pipe solaced himself with the free lance's formula, "Now I'm here I'm nowhere else, and the Lord knows where I might be! Further, as I'm not going back again, I'll make myself comfortable until some nigger canoe boy comes along."

It was next day before a woolly-headed creek man with hideous ridges of blue tattoo standing out in relief upon his greasy skin passed that way, and immediately flopped like a frog over the side of his canoe when Cummings, sighting at her opposite extremity, fired his revolver. The negro, swimming to the other side, vanished into the forest, and the white man casting a bowline on one of the moorings lassoed the canoe with it, stowed his provisions on board, and then sat down to think, which was for him a somewhat unusual proceeding. He had, however, passed one day and night alone in the African bush, and it had made its due impression. Again a trifling incident helped to bring about important results, because if Cummings had not uncorked the whisky bottle to aid his deliberations it is possible he might have abandoned his expedition. As it was, by the time the bottle was empty he had resolved to push on until he found hoards of gold and ivory, or reached the Mediterranean.

So he took up the paddle, and, because he considered the three-crank engine and screw propeller the only motive power adapted to an enlightened age, panted and swore as the light craft zigzagged up stream with her bows pointing towards the mysterious heart of Africa. The shilling was consulted several times before darkness fell, for there was water everywhere, oily black bayoux, and miry tunnels that lost themselves in thick hot shade, which Cummings enumerated in his Molesworth pocket-book, so many to the right hand, so many to the left. He made fast the ti-ti painter to a drooping branch at sunset, but slept little that night, for when the moon rose the forest creatures awoke, and the bush was filled with mysterious rustlings. The coughing whine of crocodiles came out of the shadows, and several times he sat up with a shout as some scaly brute drove with a soft rippling

towards the canoe. Morning came at last, and Cummings, glad to escape from that place of horror, took up the paddle, and, reaching another forking of the waterways, very uncertain as to whether he should not turn back, spun the shilling, which this time indicated—right.

He continued slowly, and it was noon when, as a steady thudding sound broke through the great silence of the forest, the explorer, recognising the splash of paddles, whipped out the cheap revolver. At last he was to meet some of the dark land's inhabitants. Presently a great hollow cottonwood came foaming round a bend, twelve naked men with knitted hair and blue moles upon their faces swinging over the glinting blades, while more squatted astern amid an arsenal of keen steel matchets and long-barrelled guns. The negroes ceased paddling close alongside, and a personage in crownless silk hat and hussar's dolman made a speech whose purport Cummings did not comprehend, then beckoned him to board the larger craft, which he did, bringing his cases with him and sitting upon them for greater security. Once more the paddles splashed, and the unwieldy craft, driven by force of well-trained muscle, surged on as fast as many a factory launch, while Cummings wondered what would be the end of it as he languidly watched the long panorama of forest and water unroll itself before him.

He afterwards gave several diverse and highly coloured accounts of how he travelled as an honoured guest in state, though the white men who heard him accepted his statements with caution, but at last he was landed before a native village. It was of a type common in that land—irregular rows of huts, some of wattled branches and some of sun-baked mud, rising out of the pale green bananas and yam trailers surrounding an open space of sand. Mighty cottonwoods encircled it, a stout log stockade, behind which were mounted several venerable guns, stretched across part of the water front, and several ponderous trunks hung with creeper rope floated ready to bar the creek against a hostile flotilla. The blue-jackets of the coast patrol gunboats, as well as the Protectorate officers, have visited many such places, and with the help of explosives obliterated a few of them.

Cummings was haled before a stout negro of middle age, whose skin was no darker than yellow, wearing a long white cotton robe and crimson turban. Several others resembling him sat in state behind, and two men whose lack of clothing was partly atoned for by an abundance of charms, including human bones, sat a little apart, eyeing the white stranger suspiciously. They were the exponents of the Ju-Ju mystery. A man who had probably absconded from some seaboard factory appeared as interpreter, and Cummings commenced the palaver by saying—

"You can tell His Majesty I'm a man who builds them 'teamboat which bring you out your gin. I savvy make anything, and I've come to mend his guns for him. Bring me too much old ones and I'll show him what I be fit to do; but first I want my bokuses."

The interpreter delivered his message, the deal cases and tools were brought, and with all the ceremony he could muster Cummings presented that containing mineral waters to the headman. The eyes of the latter glistened at the sight of the bottles, and he signed to an attendant, who promptly reappeared with a nickelled lever corkscrew obtained from some factory, after which his sable Majesty flung back his head as he raised the bottle. Then he expectorated, and hurled it with violence at the head of his cupbearer, saying in English, while an expression of profound disgust suffused his countenance, "That be dam poor stuff!"

After this, while Cummings gasped with astonishment, he lapsed into the native idiom, and the mechanic, being ordered to show what he could do with a disabled gun, proceeded to unscrew the nipple and breech-plug. As a result, the gun when loaded went off, and the headman inquired through his interpreter, "You be fit to make green-bokus gin?"

This was a staggering question, but Cummings, who could rise to the occasion and was also a self-confident person, answered indifferently, "I be fit to make everything."

He was then escorted to an empty hut, and during the rest of the day sundry naked black men piled up before it lethal weapons of many kinds in various stages of

decrepitude, including several modern rifles. The headman desired him to test his abilities on these, they said; then bringing in fish, bananas, and something which looked like monkey's flesh stewed in spiced palm oil, left him to his meditations.

"Here's a month's work for a beginning," Cummings observed. "I wish I was equally sure of getting paid for it. Still, I haven't been to sea for nothing, and if the presents are not forthcoming I must try to find out where he keeps his ivory."

Then having eaten, he laid the revolver handy, and, in spite of the mosquitoes and even worse insects, went peacefully to sleep. Meanwhile, Headman Shotille, who claimed dominion over all that forest, held a solemn palaver with his chief counsellors regarding the white man's fate, and finally decided that so long as he made himself useful he might be permitted to reside there on sufferance. When there was no further need of his services, or if he witnessed occurrences which might, if reported, imperil the somewhat strained relations existing between that State and the Niger Protectorate officials, he could always be quietly poisoned, and sent down to the coast as a victim of fever, the forest potentate pointed out.

Now Western civilisation and Christianity make slow progress among the half-naked denizens of the African swamps. Indeed, a few hours' steam from the Government Consulates will land the inquirer among scenes of primitive barbarity; but if the negro still practises human sacrifice and horrible Ju-Ju rites his rulers have awakened to the benefits of European trade. They are also of two classes, the first, and at times least dangerous, the representative of an ancient dynasty in whom some Ju-Ju is supposed to incarnate itself. Such a one is bound by tradition and dare not move without the concurrence of his priesthood, while the other is the product of modern commercialism. He is usually an oil trader, grown rich and powerful, who extends his operations by a strong hand, suppressing competition with the flintlock gun, and wiping out rival markets by midnight foray, until the seaboard factories can only obtain oil from him. Then,

by mysterious means, he obtains old cast-iron guns and fortifies his village, sends out naked warriors to secure fresh oil-producing territory, and levies toll on any produce passing his way, until a costly expedition is despatched to make an end of him. Shotille aspired to become one of the latter class, and accordingly fancied a good gunsmith might prove useful.

For several weeks Cummings mended weapons, and received no pay for it. He was also glad to protract his operations, because the headman sent word that when he had finished he would be expected to manufacture gin, which is thereabouts the main currency, and Cummings was doubtful of his success as a distiller. So he began to meditate on a secret departure, and only lingered because he desired to take as much ivory as possible with him, and could not discover where it was hidden, until one day, when the interpreter accompanied him up the creek in search of hardwood to make charcoal from, the latter said—

"You savvy make them green gin; it be time you lib for begin. Second headman say yesterday what we dun feed them dam low white t'ief for? Headman he like them green-bokus gin too much, and you begin one time if you dun got sense enough."

The negro touched his throat significantly, and leaving him in the canoe Cummings strolled away into the forest distinctly unhappy. It was evident his skill as a distiller would be practically tested very soon. He flung himself down among the wide-girthed trunks, and by degrees something about them recalled others he had seen when running a tramway through the bush in Central America. Bark and leaves were certainly very similar, but the great trunks were even mightier, and he rose trembling with eagerness on the brink of a discovery. Ten minutes' work with a matchet made a deep incision in the nearest, and Cummings shouted exultantly. There were hundreds and hundreds of them stretching up river as far as eye could see, and the wood was choicest mahogany.

Then he sat down examining the chips with nervous fingers. The timber was as good as any grown in Honduras, better, he thought, than that shipped from the Gold

Coast Axim, and here there was no need to purchase land or build roads to get it out. Fuel could be had for nothing; one launch could tow great rafts to the coast; and while the value of hardwood varies in proportion to the size of the boards that can be sawn from it, these trees were of splendid girth. It was therefore advisable to return to the coast and convert the knowledge into currency, but that promised to be difficult, and the discoverer abused King Shotille and his projected distillery.

Cummings returned to the native village, and for a week amused the headman by making gun barrels red hot and twisting them into bends. He also made a tank out of a galvanised iron roofing sheet, and bade the negroes gather heaps of yams and place them to rot in the sun, chuckling to himself as he did it. "The longer they keep me here the more sorry they'll be. I'll have spoiled a good deal of property before I get away."

Then he announced that he could not think clearly in the hut he occupied, because some malevolent spirit haunted it, and demanded another on the outskirts of the village hard by the canoe landing. The request was granted, and for several nights the distiller wandered ostentatiously up and down outside his new residence. He was consulting his Ju-Ju, he explained, and was startled when, after the rest had accepted that statement, Shotille said in English, with something very like a wink, "I savvy all about them Ju-Ju. Oh yes, these bushmen dam ignorant, but I savvy too much. You lib for make me plenty gin one time, quick."

Cummings realised that further delay might be perilous, and determined to make a bid for liberty that very night, while as fate would have it a canoe with paddles in it lay alongside the bank when he took his nocturnal stroll. Several times he slowly paced up and down until the last red flicker of firelight died out in the village and white mist gathered thicker and thicker over the sluggish stream. Then he crept down the bank, loosed the creeper line, and lay along the bottom of the dug-out, while the current swung her clear. Nothing stirred behind him; there was only the slow lap of water from the river ahead, and ripping off his ragged jacket he shook his fist in the

direction of the hidden village before he seized a paddle and plied it furiously.

"You'll wait a mighty long time for your gin," he said. "And now for the coast to sell what I've found out. It will be worth a few hundred pounds at least, I'm thinking."

## III

### THE RETURN OF THE COLONIAL

It was Alexander Cummings who discovered the hardwood forest in King Shotille's dominions, but had he been left to his own resources it is highly probable the trees would have grown and rotted undisturbed as they had done for centuries. This, however, was not to be, for men with the qualities he lacked were shortly to follow his lead. Distance counts for little in these days of high-pressure steam, and the sequence of events which brought one of them from a remote corner of the world came about quite naturally.

After many vicissitudes of fortune in the new lands of the West, Edward Lyle, the Canadian rancher, had entered upon an era of prosperity. New mines had been driven into the hillside near his pre-empted land, and when a wooden town sprang up like a mushroom its value increased tenfold. Lyle sold part and invested the proceeds in mining stock, which, and this does not always happen, returned him good dividends, while his cattle, fruit, and produce realised record prices. Accordingly, he looked forward to the fulfilment of his cherished dream, a return to the mother country he had left when a raw stripling. He wrote to his elder brother, who was a person of importance there, and one night sat discussing the matter with his partner in a log dwelling among the giant redwoods of British Columbia.

Lyle was still a comparatively young man, bronzed by snow-blink as well as scorching sun, and hardened by

heavy physical toil. He wore an old deerskin jacket over garments of blue jean, which in picturesque fashion enhanced the symmetry of a muscular figure. His hair was brown and crisp, his eyes were grey, and his weather-beaten face both shrewd and honest; but though he had struggled hard for a living, no keen observer would have mistaken him for a mere wielder of saw and axe.

"Ay; it's a good land, the old one," said his grizzled North British partner reflectively. "For many a day I longed sairly for a breath o' the peat reek an' a sight o' its broom an' heather, but I'm no that certain it would fit me to live there noo. Ye have been over-long in the bush to settle down yonder, an' I'm thinking ye'll be wearying for the smell o' the cedars before ye have passed a three months with your gilt-edge friends."

Lyle protested that he did not think so, and his partner chuckled as he continued, "Maybe no—ye can try an' see. Did ye ever hear o' Tam Gordon the log-driver's visit to the old country? No? Weel, there's a moral to it that might fit ye. Ten years Tam talked of going home, and then home he went, met his friends in Glasgow, and it's possible they had a wee drop whisky, for somebody started a stramash and the police locked Tam Gordon up. 'It's discharged ye are with a caution,' said the magistrate. An' 'Have I come six thousand miles for this?' says Tam. 'I'm wanting the first boat for Quebec. There's no liberty in your played-out country, an' ye'll see nae mair o' me.'"

Lyle departed a few days later, travelling first-class on the C.P.R., and, as the boys cheered him out of the depôt, remembered how he had first patronised that railway by walking fifty miles along its cross-ties to save the cost of a ticket. It was curious, however, that presently he left the city men in the first-class car and consorted with certain free prospectors in the Colonist smoker. Neither did he enjoy the ocean passage so much as he had anticipated, for his fellow-travellers conversed chiefly about shares and trusts, or abused the *menu*, while Lyle, who had earned his dollars hardly, found small satisfaction in losing them at games of chance which did not interest him. Once he said to the genial purser who

rallied him, "No; I'm not naturally unsociable, but I've been chopping big trees and trying to do three things at once so long that I've lost the hang of this loafing. I dare say I could pick it up if the voyage lasted long enough, but if the mate would permit it, a spell at deck scrubbing would be a relief to me in the meantime!"

The purser smiled. "We have brought men like you home before," he said. "Some of them were going to retire upon a competence, and came back a few months later when they found retirement deadly monotonous. You fellows work too hard out West, and doing nothing but piling up dollars is a bad habit that grows on one. I sometimes wish I could acquire it."

In due time Lyle alighted from a stopping train at a little flower-decked station in rural England. Nobody else got out, and when it went on again he strapped a large wicker creel upon his shoulders, pitched a rook-rifle and a fishing-rod lately purchased in London under his arm, and inquired of the stationmaster how long it would take him to walk to Thornton Dene.

"You can't walk there with them things—it's seven good mile," said the official; "if you wait two hours the branch train will take you in;" and Lyle, answering, "Wait two hours?—I shall be there by then. I'm not a cripple, and a hundred miles isn't a long walk in the country I come from," marched out of the station, leaving the man who kept it staring in blank amaze after him.

It was in the mellow autumn, and as he trudged along the hard white road one of the fairest valleys in England unrolled itself before him. Ridges of grey rock and purple heather shut it in, and cool green meadows rolled down to the river hollow, out of which rose the song of hurrying water and the musical tinkle of reapers among the golden grain. The meadowsweet had not all gone, honeysuckle garlanded the hedges, while here and there a second cutting of clover stretched in thin brown rows, and the wanderer sniffed delightedly, remembering how often he had pictured all this in the shadow of limitless forests and the haze of icy seas.

Nevertheless, there was something wanting, the amplitude of wide spaces and sense of freedom, for barbed wire

fringed the gateways, and the hedges hemming in the dusty road were tall and prickly. Once, too, when he would have cut off a bend by crossing a breadth of emerald sward and was confronted by a board bearing the legend, "Trespassers rigorously prosecuted. All dogs destroyed," it positively hurt him. He could understand the feelings of other travellers who on passing had evidently relieved them by hurling large stones at it.

Five dusty miles he plodded, and then, seeing that a branch line promised a shorter route, proceeded to walk along it, whistling cheerily, until a man in corduroy ran after him. Lyle frowned when he said, "You must get off this here, sir. Didn't you see them notices? Why!—a man got himself killed by an engine two years ago."

"Oh yes; I saw the notices," Lyle said wearily. "They're stuck up everywhere, disfiguring all the scenery. Men get themselves killed somewhere, don't they, every day? That evidently hasn't struck you—eh? But do you mind telling me where I may go?"

"Keep right on the high road," answered the railway servant. "I don't see what you're gettin' at, but it's forty shillin' and costses if you come off it."

Lyle retraced his steps and at last arrived at a pretty villa outside Thornton Hamlet, where his elder brother stared hard at the sunburnt dusty figure plodding sturdily up the drive.

"Delighted, Ted; I hardly knew you at first," he said. "But why didn't you wire you were coming to-day, so I could have driven over to meet you? How did you get here, and where are your things?"

"I walked," said Edward simply, unslinging his creel and depositing it with a sigh of satisfaction on the steps. "And here are my things. If I should want any more I can buy them."

Wilfred Lyle stared at him to discover if this was a jest; then made answer, "My dear fellow, you really shouldn't have done it. Can't a man walk if he likes it? Of course he can, but one has to live up to his station in this country, and it's hardly consistent to trudge seven miles to visit a relative who keeps horses."

Edward was shown the new property—a pretty villa

sheltered by a beech wood with meadows behind it climbing the face of a hill, and grey-walled garden and velvet lawn stretching down to a sparkling river. This at least fulfilled his dream of the England of tender memories. He was duly presented to Mrs. Wilfred Lyle, who favoured him with a sidelong glance of approving scrutiny when he sat beside her at dinner. She was a tall, dark, dignified woman immaculately dressed, with a face her husband called patrician and some of her neighbours wooden. Nevertheless, as she confined her conversation to the merits of the latest drama and sensational novel Edward did not find it interesting. He had not seen the drama, but had read the book, and agreed with his Calvinistic partner, who said, "Man, the thing's no decent, and ought to be burnt."

The men who grapple with savage nature in the primeval bush, even if they allow their health and personal appearance to take care of themselves, usually keep their ideals high and clean, and the wanderer experienced a shock on finding that his brother's wife would even admit to its perusal. It was long since he had left England, and remembering his mother most clearly he had, it seemed foolishly, pictured his countrywomen as in a measure resembling her. Still, he enjoyed the evening's chat with his brother, and when he retired Mrs. Lyle said, "He is quite passable, Wilfred, and those who admire rude physical vigour would no doubt consider him handsome, besides possessing old-fashioned views which are positively refreshing. I wonder what Eveline Lonsdale will think of him."

Lyle's eyes were faintly luminous as he answered, "He is a relative of your own, Clara, and the fact that he works for his living shouldn't turn your husband's brother into a field labourer. Still, you'll find him unsophisticated, and whatever Eveline thinks is her own business. She, I understand, is destined for your friend Markham."

Edward rose at five next morning, as he was used to do, and being accustomed to a plunge into a snow-fed river, prospected for the civilised substitute, and duly discovered it. This accomplished, he glanced dubiously

at the porcelain bath, polished tiles, mats, and thick linoleum.

"I guess I should spoil something if I went in there," he said. "What in the name of wonder does Wilfred keep in all those bottles, and what can any man want with six towels?"

He glanced out of the window, and that decided him. Sparkling under the alders, with the leaves of water-lilies floating on a deer pool, the river caught the morning sun; so dressing hastily he crossed the dewy lawn, and plunged down head-foremost into seven feet of water from the boat-house gallery. Flinging aloft the glistening drops with swinging left palm he shot round a willow-fringed bend, and a man unlawfully employed who caught the flash of white limbs prepared to depart in a hurry until the swimmer cried, "If you're breaking any regulations you needn't be afraid of me. It's quite pleasant to find somebody taking a liberty. Say, if you'll give me a trout for breakfast I'll clear that fouled line for you."

The poacher, who at first evidently regarded him as a lunatic, assented dubiously, but Edward diving for the sinker received the covenanted trout. Then the former rubbed his fingers through his hair with a puzzled gesture as he watched the swimmer return, paddling easily with the fish in one hand, until he vanished among the willows, when an excited man in blue uniform ran along the opposite bank.

"Hi! you. Come out this minute!" a shout rang across the river. "Stop, and come here. I want your address and occupation, and how old you are."

"So early in the morning!" Edward swimming on in midstream answered ironically. "Go home, and sleep it off. I'm surprised at you," but when having hidden the trout he was partly dressed the constable, who crossed by a footbridge, came up panting with a big note-book, and appeared astonished at hearing the offender's name.

"It's dead again the by-laws—strictly prohibited by order of the rural authority," he commenced. "Hasn't Mr. Lyle got a bathroom of his own?—and you ought to have known better, sir."

"He has. I was afraid of ruining it. Can't a man

even wash himself? I suppose you are allowed to wash sometimes in this country;" and the constable answered sternly, "No; there's a model bath in the village for them as likes it. Sixpence, and clean water if you goes on Tuesdays. You can't do nothing, anyhow, when you wants to, or what's the by-laws for?"

"I'll try to remember. Well, why don't you go? Of course, I was forgetting—another custom of the country. Here's a shilling for you."

The constable departed mollified, and Edward, who had intended to make a jest of his adventures at breakfast, felt his heart fail him when Mrs. Lyle greeted him with a stately solemnity. Instead, he gave the trout surreptitiously to the cat, and was anathematised by an irate housemaid when the beast defiled the hall with it. A week or two passed without serious misadventure, though several times at night Edward slipped out to watch with the poacher beside the river. He felt a satisfaction in defying some at least of the rigid conventionalities, and the man was interesting, though his company cost him several pounds of tobacco, and once when they were surprised by a water bailiff the sum of fifteen shillings. He also met Eveline Lonsdale, and found her all he expected an innocent, healthy and high-spirited English maiden to be. She could ride like a Western Canadian, discuss practical matters shrewdly, and stir her listeners to laughter with merry badinage.

He had seen Western maidens almost as fair physically, but they possessed the cruder characteristics of the virgin soil, and lacked the charm of this carefully cultivated English rose. He also met a certain Clarence Markham, and a friendship, which was afterwards to stand the test of fire and fever, grew up between them, while he received what he considered was convincing evidence of Miss Lonsdale's common sense. The harvest was nearly over, and one afternoon, when Edward, who had, as his partner predicted, commenced to long in idleness for the roar of the snow-fed river to rouse him to a day of effort in the Canadian bush, strolled into a wheat-field, he found the labourers insufficient to keep up with the reaper. He had saved his own harvests hardly, and it seemed sinful

to waste a moment of such splendid drying weather. It struck him also that their plan of operations was open to improvement.

Accordingly he offered to help them, and, as the day was fiercely hot, with no air of wind to ripple the bending ears, stripped off his jacket. By and by the garment under it followed too, and rolling his sleeves to the shoulder he started in, as he afterwards expressed it, to astonish the Islanders. He found this harder work than he anticipated, and at last halted with the perspiration dripping from his bronzed forehead to refresh himself with a draught of harvest ale. Tilting the heavy jar above his head, he stood balancing it so as to drink bush-fashion from the nozzle, which is not easy to do, when there was a rattle of wheels in the road close by, and he saw his brother's dog-cart swing out of the cool shadow of a copse.

Its occupants also saw him, and Eveline Lonsdale remembered the tableau. For a background there was a sea of wheat ears and a clean-cut wall of yellow stems that seemed to shimmer with reflected light, and silhouetted against it the figure of a man, stalwart, statuesque, and filled with the pristine vigour of a clean life of labour in the bush. She had some artistic skill, and noticed the firm set of the brawny shoulders, bronzed and corded arms, the ring where the tan faded into the whiteness below the neck, as well as how the thin white shirt curved in to the waist, which displayed the springy slenderness produced by much swinging of the heavy axe. She knew the man was well-informed and respectful to all women, if direct in speech, with a rugged strength of character and simple, healthy tastes, and now he reminded her of the old Greek heroes, or the fair-haired sea-rovers he was doubtless descended from. Women of narrower perceptions might have considered him merely an unsophisticated barbarian, and one of them did.

Then there was a change, for Edward, hearing the dog-cart pulled up, dropped the jar, ran for his jacket, and struggling into it faced the newcomers with his straw hat clapped on wrong side foremost, and one arm that failed to find the sleeve hanging partly clear of the garment.

"What in the world are you doing, Ted?" asked Wilfred Lyle.

Mrs. Lyle said nothing, but Edward fidgeted under her gaze, which spoke volumes, as he answered, "It was too hot a day to do nothing in, and when I saw those fellows beaten by the machine I really couldn't resist the temptation of helping them. You see everybody, ranch owner and paid hand, does his best at harvest time in the bush."

Wilfred Lyle pursed his lips. He dare not smile while his wife looked at him; but Eveline broke in, "I think you were right, Mr. Lyle. Do you know I envy you the liberty which permits you making yourself useful. I fancy we should all return refreshed from an attempt to improve our acquaintance with the kindly earth."

She would have said more, but that Wilfred flicked his whip and the vehicle rattled on down the valley, while Edward shrugging his shoulders resumed his task, and tried to pacify his comrades for the loss of part of the contents of the jar. In his confusion he had forgotten to replace the cork. When he returned that evening Mrs. Lyle was distinctly cold to him, and his brother said, "You really must not do these things, Ted. As I dare say you have guessed, my wife is ambitious, and I am a newcomer in this district, with what is only a small property. Otherwise, it might be different, for, of course, if I was rich enough I could amuse myself digging potatoes if I liked it."

"I'm sorry," said Edward, "I keep forgetting—there are so many things a man mayn't do. Say, you should really get a schedule of them printed. It's curious that over yonder we revere this land as the birthplace of liberty."

The weeks slipped by, but Edward still lingered at Thornton, seeing more and more of Eveline, until one evening he said to Wilfred, "I'm going to show you what can be done with a small rifle if I can get a good stand in the wood we've been asked to help in the shooting."

Wilfred made a gesture of almost horrified negation. "A rifle!—good heavens, Ted, are you stark mad? You will take my new self-ejector gun instead. You couldn't

even stop a crippled rabbit with the other, and as it's a large party I don't want you indicted for manslaughter."

Edward laughed. "When one has learned how to stop a diving seal or a deer at long range going full-tilt through giant fern I can't see much difficulty in holding up a thirty-yard rabbit, or even a pheasant coming straight on. I thought it would be interesting to the men who must scatter an ounce of shot all round everything. Besides, we learn a little woodcraft in the West, and inside five minutes I'd know just where every man was by hearing alone."

"I don't want to argue. You simply can't. As your Western friends would express it, this party is not going to end up in a burying matinée;" and Edward answered, "Then give me a cylinder blunderbuss, and I'll try to play your way."

He went out, and for a time strolled up and down the lawn listening to the gurgle of the river and watching the steely starlight flicker on the pool. Already he was longing for the old life of action, and before he slept wrote a letter to his partner in which he said, "I've lost touch with the land that bred me. It's too smooth-shaven, polished, and walled in, though I've a tenderness for it still. Here a man is so chained up by his clothes and traditions that he can't even say plainly what he thinks, and it's my opinion most of the natives don't want him to. You were right, Hector. My place is with the axe and ox-team among the boys who understand me across the sea, and I'm probably coming as soon as I can decide a certain important question."

The question was, "Would it be just to her if I asked Eveline Lonsdale to come back to the untrammelled life of the bush with me?"

## IV

### AT HERON'S FACTORY

ONE night when the palm tufts vibrated under the thrashing of the rain, agent Heron sat poring over his stock list in a West African factory. The lights of two other factories blinked faintly across the Silver River, which flowed past below, but the forest beyond them was blotted out by the rush of the tropical deluge. Moisture trickled down the match-boarded walls, and the room reeked of mildew, stale tobacco, and kerosene. Agent Heron was under thirty years of age, but looked more, and had seen several superiors die off above his head before he attained the position. He wore a suit of pyjamas over a gauzy singlet, and slippers of red leather dressed by the Moslem of the hinterland, which were necessary because of the jigger insect, which burrows into the unprotected foot. Nevertheless, the perspiration dripping from his forehead splashed on to the papers before him, for the oil lamp raised the already high temperature to an almost insupportable degree. It was his business to exchange Manchester cotton, salt, and gin for palm kernels and oil with the black bush merchants, who displayed no mean ability in conducting their trade. Each puncheon of the yellow grease he shipped home was also paid for by blood and suffering, but Heron understood the risks when he accepted the position, and was loyal to a considerate employer.

"I don't know where we're going to stow all the oil unless a boat turns up empty very soon," he said, glancing at his youthful assistant, who was trying to add up columns of figures that grew blurred before his dazzled eyes. "Every shed is crammed, and we'll have to pile the next lot beneath the dwelling. I wonder how the Amalgamation robbers feel now, when, after trying to choke off Northop Markham, they find he can beat them at their own game. For a week their man Smithers went round clucking with a swollen head because he had secured all

the second-rate rubbish left in Shotille's country, and never even guessed I ran the prices up and let him have it at several shillings a ton over what we paid for the best. Yes, we've beaten them from first to last, and there's not much of the simpleton about Headman Shotille."

"But isn't it risky?" said the young assistant. "Good oil is shipped from other parts of Africa, and you can't corner a local market without forcing prices up. Suppose when we're holding so much values in England go down."

Heron laughed. "You can trust your employer to protect himself at home. It's a fight to the finish between him and the Amalgamation, who want to squeeze him off the rivers. Markham's hard to squeeze, and I flatter myself we have taught them a useful lesson during this round."

"But!" the assistant commenced again, and because no white man's temper is good in the wet season Heron turned upon him angrily. "Don't try to convince me of your ignorance; I'll take it for granted. Northop Markham is the cleverest man in all this distressful trade, and it will save you asking foolish questions if you remember it. Go out, and see if there is any sign of the canoes."

The assistant did so, and for a time heard nothing but the roar of the deluge. Then a faint thudding sound broke through it, and he returned saying, "They're coming."

Ten minutes passed, and Heron standing on the verandah could dimly see canoe after canoe slide towards the landing as he hurled down orders at the naked figures in the rain below, after which he came in, saying, "Tell Bad Dollar to bring in dinner or there'll be chaos let loose between the oil men and our Kroos before we're ready. They broke half the shovels and doubled up two of my best boys during the last discussion. Confound them for coming just now."

Neither of the pair had much appetite, but the hour spent over dinner was a pleasant break in the monotony of the day, and Heron was in an ill-humour as, warned by an increasing clamour outside, he bolted the food. Still he had not emptied his first plateful of steaming palm-oil-chop before there was a pounding on the door, and, supported by a wet negro, a dripping object reeled into the room. "Good heavens, a white man!" gasped Heron.

"Steady, hold him up, Frypan. Where in the name of wonder did you come from?"

A European staggered forward and clutched at the back of a chair. His face was haggard, red veins streaked his eyes, and the water that trickled from the rags which scarcely covered him decently formed pools upon the floor. The shapeless remains of a sodden sun hat clung to his long, soaked hair, and he said with an evident effort, "From up there in the forest. I've got fever, or some of those nigger devils have poisoned me. You won't turn me out, will you?"

"Turn you out!" said Heron. "Of course not. Sit down before you fall over. Pour him out some whisky, Hassal. There, get that inside you."

"Good men!" was the strained answer. "Struck another factory—turned out like a dog. Well, the man who did it missed his chance of a fortune. Here's to ye—salud."

The stranger gulped down part of the liquor, let the glass slip from his nerveless fingers, and then his wet head sank forward upon the table.

"Turn him out!" said Heron savagely. "The poor devil's dying, I think. No starving white man was ever turned out of a Markham factory. Get hold of his shoulders, Frypan, and we'll strip these wet things off him, and roll him into dry blankets. Steady—he's as heavy as lead. Tell Jones to watch the niggers."

The agent forgot the waiting canoes, and it was not until his patient lay with the healing perspiration streaming from him that he remembered them. Then the stranger, who ate ravenously a small portion of the palm-oil-chop Heron fed him with and choked over the rest, explained, "I'm Cummings who ran the mission launch. Got something to tell you, but can't remember it."

"He'll do for a time," said Heron, when Cummings closed his eyes. "You'll sit there, Hassal, and keep the blankets piled up, dosing him with green-lime water, though goodness knows how I'll keep those wild bushmen from damaging my boys or flinging half the kernels into the river without you."

He went out into the thrashing rain, and stayed there

most of the night holding his sable assistants to their task of storing the oil, but he dismissed the youthful Hassal to sleep on his return, and sat up until daylight, when the fever slackened its grip, watching his patient. The oil traders are not always choice in sentiment or speech, but they own the bond of colour, and their failings seldom include a narrow selfishness. So it was not surprising that for several busy days, during which more oil came down, and there was work for six Europeans about the factory, agent Heron found time to fight stubbornly for the life of an unknown stranger, and won the battle. Thus it happened that one afternoon Cummings, whose burly frame was shrunken, lay limply in a basket chair on the verandah while Heron waited his revelations.

"I think you owe me an account of how you came here, and you rambled about a fortune every night," he said. "Of course, you needn't tell me more than you like—we don't want to make capital out of our guests. But what I do want to know is who turned you out. It's a slur on the credit of all of us, you see."

"What did I say?" And the agent answered, "Nothing I could make head or tail of—a jumble about hidden treasure, making spirits, and fooling some headman. You haven't been starting an African distillery, have you?"

"I tried it," said Cummings, whose eyes twinkled. "It wasn't a success. As regards your other question, I'd wandered, almost perishing, goodness knows how long, trying to find a way out of those infernal creeks, and a little wrong in the head, before I chanced upon a rickety factory one night. I could scarcely drag myself up the verandah stairway, and stopped to pull myself together at the top. It was all very still, no sign of a Krooboy, no sign of anybody; black forest all round it, and one light in a room. I pushed the door open, and a white man sat there with a bottle beside him, and his head turned from me. I let go the door and blundered in. The white man whipped out a revolver and jumped up howling, 'Good Lord, it's Jevons.'

"I fell over the table: he blazed twice at me, but I went for him with the bottle through the smoke, and

followed him, still howling, out upon the verandah. Then because everything seemed spinning round I fell solid head first down the stairway, and somehow got back to my canoe. Next thing I remember was your oil carriers falling in with me."

Heron smiled a little. "It must have been Smithers. The Amalgamation had no business to send a man without a backbone up there. You want a clean conscience and iron nerve in that country, and though he has done some pretty risky things Smithers has neither, so what usually happens when one lives his way, stewed in poisonous steam night and day, happened to him. Jevons was his comrade, and the factory boys said Smithers got scared and made himself blind drunk the night he was dying. Anyway, I'm glad he did it in a panic and not in cold blood, and I dare say you looked sufficiently like a ghost."

"Perhaps so!" and Cummings' fingers closed. "But if I'd once got my hands on him the Amalgamation would have had a vacancy for another agent. And now to business. I'm everlastingly grateful, but this is the chance of my life, and I'm bound to profit by it. Will you give me five hundred pounds for a secret that will bring in your master five thousand yearly?"

"No—are you quite better? I'm here to purchase oil, and secrets are not a marketable commodity."

"This one is, on my solemn word of honour; but after what you have done for me I don't want to try the opposition. Man, you don't know what you're refusing, and if it's only out of gratitude I want to sell it you."

"I can't trade. Daren't exceed my authority, and any unusual expenditure must be authorised at home. Still, if you are going back to England you might see my employer, N. S. Markham, before you move further. Even the Amalgamation would have to deal with it there."

"I will," said Cummings. "But what is this Amalgamation, and who is N. S. Markham? I only know that you took me in, and the other fellow's servant shot at me."

"I'm Markham's man, and proud of it," said Heron, starting on what—and this was distinctly unusual in that region—was a favourite topic. "He took me out of the

gutter, and made me what I am. Markham runs his business like a gentleman; no screwing down of salaries and reducing store lists as they do under the Amalgamation. Markham takes big risks for big profits, and doesn't treat every agent as if he were a thief. He has other factories along the coast, but does most business in these particularly forsaken swamps!

"Now for the Amalgamation. You know, or perhaps you don't, that the day of the Chartered Company has passed, and it's as sure as it is that the man who drinks too much here goes under that the great monopoly will shortly cede its dominions to Imperial authority. Well, it was built up out of a big combine, and several men have planned another to imitate it. They don't want a charter, but you can stamp out competition without one if you have sufficient capital. The weaker men have joined them, and they're either buying the others in—cheap—or grinding them out, so that already they think they own these rivers. They don't, and never will so long as N. S. Markham's living. This season they have planned to corner all the oil and starve him into submission, and what's the result? Markham & Company hold so much that they can hardly find room in the steamers to take it home, beside future delivery agreements."

Cummings, glancing over the balustrade, saw tier upon tier of barrels, whitewashed to stop the suction, ranged beside the flaming river. Looking in through the open doors he could see that each long iron shed was gorged with more, and having learned a little of native methods said, "A good many black men used up gathering it?"

"Probably!" said Heron. "We can't help that. And except for a weakness for open violence the black bush merchants don't differ greatly from other commercialists I could mention in their efforts to cut each other's throats. The man who thinks the native speculator doesn't know his business as well as any European is a fool. What we can do is to economise the waste of young assistants, and our folks do it, sending out decent stores and drugs instead of the rubbish you'll find in some of the factories. I call it murder to heap up dividends and then watch some poor young fifty-pound-a-year devil dying because you've

nothing in the medicine chest fit to give him. There are other good men beside Markham who agree with me."

"Well," said Cummings gravely, "I'm indebted to Markham, and will give him first chance. I fancy I can put him on the track of something that will pay him better than oil, but I've got to get home first. I'm a certificated engineer—with bad discharges—but I could make myself handy in a liner's engine-room, and I'll beg no passage from anybody."

"I can arrange that. In a bad season the homeward boats have usually dropped a good many of their hands overboard with a firebar at their heels, and I dare say they'd be glad to get you; but you don't leave this factory until you're better."

Cummings reiterated his gratitude, and when, a fortnight later, they sat in the same place waiting for the merciful sea-breeze, Heron, pointing to a dusky blur which slid towards them down the flow of sunlit water, said, "It's your friend Smithers and another of the robbers coming. No doubt they're on their way to meet the homeward mail boat, and feeling thirsty intend to honour this place with their company. They don't drink their own agent's whisky when they can get anybody else's, which shows good judgment, and after soaking like sponges they'll try to guy me by way of thanks."

Cummings, rising slowly, straightened himself, and was glad to feel his strength returning. An angry light came into his eyes, and as they followed the canoe he said, "Then that's the brute who shot at me, and I've never come across the Englishman abroad who would fire on a helpless countryman before. There's a little surprise in store for Mister Smithers."

The veins swelled up on his forehead, but Heron answered, "You'll go collapse like a house of cards if you excite yourself this weather, and I'm not going to have any indiscriminate smashing of my furniture. Still, I'm not above making a fool of Smithers. Get in yonder, and don't come out until I or somebody gives you your cue."

Cummings retired into a covered-in part of the verandah which served as office, and by means of badly frosted windows looked into the central apartment, and presently

two strangers came in. The first was a little wiry man with a roguish look on his bronzed countenance. The other was tall and thin, with shifty eyes, and when he flung himself into a canvas lounge his lank damp fingers twitched nervously.

"Thought we'd look in and see if you were dead yet," the former explained.

"Very good of you!" said Heron. "Are you quite sure that was all you came for?" The shorter man laughed as he answered—

"Not exactly! I've been arguing three hours with a bush trader, and it made me thirsty. Besides, we wanted to inspect your pile of oil. Any sensible man would wonder how you're going to sell it!"

Now the conditions under which the white traders live are trying, and when salaries are supplemented by a bonus on the turnover fierce jealousy embitters the staffs of the rival factories against each other. In addition to this, the heat was suffocating that afternoon, and the smell of the half-tide mud nauseating. So Heron, who flung several bottles upon the table, answered shortly, "Markham will show your folks at home how, now he has cornered the pick of the market, and it's quite likely the Amalgamation will ship out a fresh crop of robbers to fill your places."

"They won't," said the thin trader, scowling. "They'll let Markham into bankruptcy when they cut the prices. Keep your oil, and sell it at thirty shillings under cost price, if you can. The English market's getting shaky."

He clawed at the table as he spoke, but his companion broke in lightly, "You're not civil, Smithers. Excuse him, Heron; his nerves are on the raw edge lately. He says it's the weather, but mine would be the same if I'd taken the tonic he has been doing. Try an iced soda neat, Smithers."

"It's sickening weather," said Heron, assuming a good humour he did not feel. "That's not a bad prescription, especially if one has been jumping up at nights and seeing things that aren't there—ghosts and such."

"You've hit it," said the other man. "Smithers—has—seen a ghost. At least, he says so, and we all know his

truthfulness. What was that tale you told me a short while ago?"

There was a general chuckle, in which Heron's assistants joined, but Smithers straightened himself in his chair, mopping his forehead.

"It's not a joke," he said. "There are lots of things happen in this country nobody can explain. I did see something that upset me for a week. I was alone one night when Marston had gone to—well, it's his own business where he went to. It was hotter than brimstone, and black as the pit, and although I didn't hear anything I felt that something was watching me. Oh yes, you can grin, but it isn't a nice feeling. Then the door opened and a figure reeled in, just as poor Jevons did when he came back after his unlucky journey to cut out the black middlemen. Its face wasn't the face of a living man, and—I'm telling you the solemn truth—I thought it was him."

Smithers filled and emptied his glass before he continued unsteadily, "You see, I was sick when Jevons went—and I always had a fancy my rascally boys didn't bury him properly. There were things he valued missing, too."

The narrator's fingers trembled: once more he mopped his forehead, and Heron could see that the soddened wretch's terror had been real enough. A hush of expectancy settled upon the room, and the listeners could hear the roofing iron strain under the heat expansion.

"The—thing—came at me, and somehow my revolver went off. I saw it sliding towards me round the table through the smoke, and was nearly making a break for the bush—and didn't. Instead, I—I defied it, backed to the top of the stairway, and then struck as it passed. It went bump, bump, bumping down, and I still waken up and hear those confounded stairs groaning under it. When I got to the bottom there was nothing there—of course the Krooboys had seen nothing either—but unless it was Jevons I saw, what the thing was I don't pretend to know."

"Liar!" broke in a wrathful voice. The office door was flung open, and the audience started when Cummings, breathing hard, stood with a flushed face in the centre of the room. "Have you never seen me before—the man

you tried to murder when he crawled half-dead into your factory?" he asked. "Get up on your feet, and you'll find him worse to deal with than any ghost."

Smithers sidled towards the doorway, gripping a bottle by its neck, but as Cummings sprang forward Heron deftly thrust a chair in front of him, and the mechanic went down full length over it. Smithers ran down the stairway, and Heron, who sat upon his patient, said amidst a burst of merriment, "You'll have to promise to keep the peace before I let you up."

"It's all right," observed the other stranger presently. "Smithers is safe in the canoe. You'll excuse me, Heron, or he'll go off without me. It's a very commonplace sequel to a gruesome story, and you needn't hold the ghost down any longer. Good-day to all of you."

Cummings rose and shook the dust off himself. "It wasn't kind of you, Heron," he said. "If the fever hadn't taken all the strength out of me I'd have taught him a lesson in spite of you."

"I apologise, but you looked dangerous, and I draw the line at manslaughter. Anyway, you have given me the whip hand over Smithers, and if ever he gets insulting I can close his mouth for him. The story of Jevons' ghost will travel all over the rivers. However, it's time I went down to meet the homeward boat, too."

The agent departed down river, and it was late when he returned, to say, "I saw the chief of the *Manyama*, and he's open to take you. You'll sign on as donkeyman, and take the Fourth's watch until he is better. She sails as soon as there's water over the bar to-morrow."

It was noon next day when Cummings shook Heron's hand gratefully at the foot of the *Manyama's* companion ladder. "You have done a good deal for me, and I won't forget it," he said. "I dare say your employer won't be sorry either, before he has finished with me."

"You will," said Heron, laughing, "if you play any tricks with him. Otherwise, you'll find him a just and liberal man. Always glad to see you if you come out again. Good-bye, and good luck to you."

It was an undemonstrative farewell, but, as usual with those who lived as they did, neither of the men was ever

demonstrative. Still, each knew he could count upon the other to prove his friendship in time of emergency. Cummings went up the ladder, which was hoisted after him, and Heron's crew pulled him slowly back to his factory. Turning in the stern sheets he saw the low black hull lurch out through the white spray of the thundering bar, and watched it diminish upon the glistening Atlantic levels. He did not know that his employer would have cause to bless the day he shipped the erratic Cummings home to him.

## V

### AT BAY

It was a dismal afternoon when Northop Markham, African merchant, sat moodily in his private office, which overlooked a busy thoroughfare in a British seaport town. From below the rumble of heavy traffic rose up through the thin drizzle, and the smoke-grimed windows rattled. Markham presently moved towards one of them and stood looking down upon the double line of heavy waggons rolling slowly past and the sturdy men who with wet sacking on their shoulders plodded ankle-deep in mud beside the steaming horses. A mass of wet umbrellas hid the faces of the hurrying folks on the sidewalks who slipped out from and into gloomy archways brass tableted, but the waggons went on continually, for the tide of a world-wide commerce pulsed through that and the few adjoining arteries. It is seldom any man can long dam back or divert even a portion of that stream, and Markham, who longed for the power to do so, felt himself being carried resistlessly forward by it in a direction in which he did not wish to go. He frowned when a line of lorries freighted with palm-oil barrels bearing the device of a crowned horse with the initials N. M. & C. creaked by.

Moving back from the window he switched on an electric light and sat down beneath it at his desk. Although past

middle age he carried his years well, and his close dark hair showed no signs of time's silvering. It was brushed back from an ample forehead, bold black eyes matched it, and if a heavy moustache hid most of the mouth there was no mistaking the determination in his jaw and chin. He sat stiffly with shoulders squared before his desk, and the very pose suggested an impetuous and strong-willed disposition. Those who did business with him knew that this man preferred to run heavy risks for heavy profits rather than follow a cautious, cheese-paring policy, and his servants that summary dismissal or a fifty per cent. advance on their salaries was equally likely. The office was artistically furnished, and contained a few fine trophies of chain mail and sword-blades from the Soudan, for though Markham was a merchant he had not sacrificed all his tastes to commercial utility.

Pressing a call button, he asked the clerk who entered, "Have you any more cable advices of oil shipments?"

"Yes, sir," was the answer. "Johnson and Peters are both sending all they have, and the small parcels from the Windward coast are coming in. Heron wires he was forced to ship heavily by the *Konnoto*, and, if I might suggest it, it would be well to let the Swansea people have as much as possible. Our own stores are crammed, and the rent account is getting heavy."

It was reported that Northop Markham never refused to consider an inferior's suggestion, or declined an interview. In fact, he had taken more than one apparently hopeless outcast into his service and made a man of him. So he answered briefly, "Then wire them what you're shipping. Did Gardner mention the last price quoted in the room?"

"The Amalgamation were offering old oil at ten shillings per ton decline."

"Tell Allen I want him the moment he comes in from South Wales," said Markham, whose face grew serious as the clerk went out. Counting all expenses, he could not afford to sell his oil at the figure mentioned, and the mercantile journals he turned over brought him small consolation. Palm oil, the staple produce of Western Africa, is used in many manufactures, but the tinplate makers take a

large proportion, and the tinplate industry was in an unsettled state just then. Each report told much the same story—a failure of the salmon along the Pacific shores of the American continent, a shrinkage in the yield of canning fruits, and the cheapening of other oils used in the manufacture of such commodities as candles and soap. As one of his rivals' servants informed Heron, it was easier to secure a leading share of the oil supply than to sell it. Markham's hand, however, had been forced, for his opponents had done their best to drive him out of the market, though neither he nor they had been able to foresee the slackening of the principal trades they catered for.

Allen duly arrived, and when his employer asked, "Have you any better news?" made answer, "I am afraid not, sir. In Newport, Cardiff, and Llanelly, I heard of nothing but schemes for reducing the tinplate output or closing down the mills. American importers are still heavily stocked, and there's a slackening demand from almost every canning centre. Oil is apparently bound to come down in value, and, as several of our best customers seem shaky, it might be better to make sure of payments than extend our sales."

The traveller furnished corroborative details, and when he had finished a slight, handsome man with a pleasant face, who assisted in the management of the Amalgamated factories, was shown in. "I had partly expected a visit," said Markham.

The visitor smiled before he answered. "I have just run down from London, where we have been making our periodical attempt to waken up a Government that won't listen to the necessity of doing something for its West African colonies. As usual, they complimented us on our public spirit—and promised nothing."

"That was not what you called to tell me;" and the stranger hesitated before he answered, "No. We were talking about you, and as all the smaller men are coming in, wondered whether you would reconsider your refusal. Of course, to-day we couldn't offer you the terms we did. Still, we have had enough of competition, and personally I'm sorry we don't agree."

"I cannot," said Markham. "I've seen similar combinations ruin the men who engineered them already, and will be no party to stifling legitimate trade. Nor do I intend to let any avaricious corporation coerce me out of my lawful business. Take a friendly warning and withdraw in time."

"Then I may say your attitude is——?"

"No surrender!" said Markham. "While I have fifty pounds to my credit I will fight. So far, I think you will allow you have not scored much against me."

The other shrugged his shoulders. "In any case we shall have an honourable adversary. As to the scoring, we're rather thankful you made it, but I see no reason why we should not trade to our mutual advantage on opportunity. You have more oil than you want, and as we need a quantity for immediate delivery until our own comes in, how far will you cut to-day's figure?"

"Do you know what my oil cost me?" and the visitor answered, "We know what you made us pay for ours, but that has nothing to do with the present value. Will you sell?"

"Not under last quotation," said Markham.

"You're foolish. It would be awkward for you if it went down several pounds a ton, or lower. All the oil in Africa doesn't come out of The Rivers, and there are other favourites besides the crowned horse brand. Well, I'm sorry to find you obdurate, and as it's evidently no use my wasting more time, good-day to you."

Markham set his lips tight when the door closed. His oil was of special quality, and now, when all his capital was sunk in it and agreements with native gatherers for future supply, any serious fall in price meant ruin to him. Still, he knew it was possible his rivals, after hunting all the coast for oil, might sell at a loss, hoping to recoup themselves by controlling the trade of the disputed territory when he had been driven out of the field. "They would not have bought. At the worst I can make them empty their treasury before they smash me," he observed.

An hour passed, and a clerk came in again to say, "Old oil is being offered at a further reduction of *2s. 6d.* A wire has come in from Swansea not to ship any more.

Mills closing down, and the demand practically *nil*. Mr. Clarence Markham is waiting to see you, sir."

"Thank you," said Markham. "Show him in," and a straight, well-set-up young man strolled into the room. He was dark like his father, and the fact that he had been trained to arms and held Her Majesty's commission was visible in his bearing. He was physically vigorous and pleasant to look upon, with a certain geniality of manner that won him many friends. The said friends usually discovered that, though hitherto Clarence Markham had lived too smooth a life to develop his full character, he was both headstrong and possessed by a very devil of obstinacy.

"They can spare me at the depôt, so I thought I would run up and see you on my way to Thornton, sir," he said. "I hope the business is doing better."

"I'm afraid it is not," said Markham. "But I can shake off my worries until to-morrow. The house here is practically shut up, but we can dine at the club and adjourn to the theatre. Pick out anything you would like to see, so long as it's not too serious. I've seen rather too much real tragedy."

"And I too little, sir," said the young officer, taking the paper. "In fact, I've been almost longing for a little excitement. You had been under fire at my age, sir."

Marhkam smiled grimly. "At your age I had seen my best friend, shot with a poisoned arrow, die in my arms, and even more unpleasant things, learning the trade I follow in Western Africa. In that country commerce has always preceded the flag. I wouldn't be impatient, Clarence; there's enough tragedy in most lives to render the longing for it quite superfluous."

Northop Markham was proud of his only son, perhaps the more so because he followed the family career, which circumstances had rendered impossible for him, and he almost forgot his troubles in the younger man's company. They returned upon him, however, when the pair sat in a corner of the smoking-room at the club, and Clarence, looking towards him through the curling blue vapour, said, "I am afraid I have never taken the interest in the oil trade that I should, but I can't help seeing that you have been

troubled lately, and think you should give me a chance of offering my intelligent sympathy."

Northop Markham scrutinised his son before he answered, and as Clarence leaned forward noticed not only the vigour of his well-proportioned frame, but something in his intent face which hinted at hitherto unexpected possibilities. He accordingly explained how his rivals had endeavoured to force him to cede his business to them at their own terms, and how after foiling them he was saddled with a load of oil which could only be sold at a loss.

"But why did you buy so heavily, sir?" asked Clarence; and the older man answered, "Unless I can get oil in exchange for my salt and cloth I must close my factories. It is not only necessary to hold one's own against an enemy, but advisable to press him in return where possible, and because human judgment has its limits I failed to foresee the various circumstances which have led to a fall in prices, while my enemies, being richer men, mean to profit by the opportunity. I had either to fight or surrender ignominiously—which would you have chosen?"

The hidden side of Clarence Markham's character became evident. He looked eager, stubborn, combatant, and his eyes sparkled as he said, "I would have staked my last penny on beating them, sir. But I want to say more. I love my profession, but one's pay won't meet expenses with a mess like ours, and now, when—excuse me putting it so—you seem in an awkward corner, you can't deny my natural right to help you."

Northop Markham's face grew troubled. "It may come to that, Clarence, though I hope not. For a good many generations one of us has served the nation, and while there's a chance left you must stay with the colours. In fact, although I hardly care to mention it, you might stay with them altogether if——"

Clarence fidgeted with his cigar before he answered, "I will not pretend to misunderstand you. Everybody seems to have decided my fate already—you mean Eveline."

"Precisely! Modesty is becoming, but there is no need for any man to depreciate himself. You are a Thornton

Markham, and officer of—and will some day come into certain family property independent of anything I can do for you. Eveline is a young lady of charming disposition as well as pretty, and, so far as one could see, has always thought well of you. It's a tolerably open secret her few immediate relations would approve the match."

"I am fond of Eveline, sir, and she is all you say!" and Markham broke in. "Then what more do you desire?"

Clarence laid down his cigar with slow deliberation. "The word was perhaps not the right one. Eveline and I are, I hope, very good friends, which, considering that we have seen so much of each other, may or may not be only natural, but one can reach a certain limit and go no further. I think Eveline has reached the limit."

"Why don't you ask her, and make certain?" said Northop Markham with a grim chuckle, and Clarence answered unflinchingly, "It would be rather a difficult question, sir—one which until I am sure of myself I have no right to ask. Even if it were otherwise, the *rôle* of a fortune-hunter would be repugnant."

The merchant laid a hand on his shoulder. "I have no wish to suggest a purely mercenary marriage, my boy, but both of you must have been blind if you failed to see that the man who has the power of leaving you considerable property desires it. As a matter of fact, the lady has only a very moderate income, rather less than your own will be when in the natural course of things the inevitable happens in a year or two, though God forbid that either of us should desire it. But if neither of you has other inducements, then you can only honestly make an end of it. Still"—and the speaker's face was whimsical—"you will provide a severe disappointment to several excellent friends."

"That will not count," said Clarence, with a contraction of his forehead. "I have suffered at their hands already—confound them—and it must have been worse for Eveline. But I shall find means of silencing them. I would sooner break stones on the roadside than do her injury. You have opened my eyes, sir, and I am grateful."

Northop Markham nodded, though he seemed faintly amused. "We will not mention this again—you generally know your own mind," he said. "Only, for the lady's

sake, I would proceed with rather more than your usual diplomacy."

Clarence did not sleep that night. His father's words were sufficient to keep his brain busy. He knew that a union with Miss Lonsdale, who was an orphan, would on account of financial reasons probably be looked upon by all concerned with approval, but the hot-blooded young soldier had his own ideas as to what was due to both. He was nevertheless troubled by a haunting fear that they had drifted into an undesirable if indefinite position, from which it would be difficult to escape.

Next day he journeyed northwards to Thornton Hall, a small and ancient, black-timbered edifice in some need of repair, to which his mother and sisters retired periodically. It stood looking out across a deep valley on a hillside of the North Country. Mrs. Markham, who was a woman of no great mental capacity, welcomed him effusively, and explained how several changes had been made on the score of economy.

"You must not mind the faded covering on your room floor," she said. "We have been retrenching severely. Of course you know Eveline's aunt is here, and she has your old quarters. They hadn't room for her and Eveline at Meadowside. No, don't try to look unconscious; that is what you came home for."

"On my word of honour I didn't," said Clarence. "I came to see you. Do you suppose I would make the journey to inspect the venerable lady who usually insists upon physicking me? It really wouldn't matter if there was earth on the floor. There probably will be."

"You must be careful. We have little assistance now. And you cannot deceive me. Remember your mother was once young herself—and perhaps as pretty as Eveline. She said she was looking forward to——"

"You were always peerless, mother; but when Mrs. Mortby asked Eveline, did she know I was coming?" and the lady, ignoring the direct question, returned to her former theme. "Wicked men are determined to ruin your father, and we are doing our best to help him by practising economy. I even had the swans shot, though it grieved me."

"Had the swans shot? Good gracious, mother, what was that for?" and Mrs. Markham answered convincingly, "Economy. We considered they were not necessary."

Clarence mastered an inclination to laugh, for if matters were becoming serious his mother's ideas of economy were eccentric. The interview also ruffled his temper, while, though he avoided Eveline as much as was civilly possible, the days that followed were trying, and only his obstinacy restrained him from making a hasty retreat from Thornton. Nobody said or did anything tangible, but circumstances seemed to conspire to thrust his company upon the fair visitor, and he had an exasperating feeling that something was expected of him. At times he could see the humorous side of the position; more often he lost his temper, until he determined to end a state of affairs which he considered must be even worse for Eveline.

The opportunity came one evening which the Markhams spent at Meadowside. When Clarence rose from a whist table where he had been playing abominably it was suggested he should search for his sister and Eveline, who had last been seen in a somewhat dilapidated conservatory. Clarence afterwards decided that the lady who made the suggestion was aware that Hilda Markham had already returned alone. In any case, he came upon Eveline Lonsdale leaning back in a canvas chair, the pose showing to advantage the graceful lines of her figure. Her fair hair sparkled under the lamplight and lay in wavy clusters on her smooth white forehead; her eyes were of the blue which matches it and the cream and rose complexion that beautifies the maidens of the North. She had passed her twenty-third birthday, but still combined a rather daring love of mischief with a sound judgment and womanly gentleness. Sometimes one quality came uppermost, sometimes another, and while the very uncertainty increased her attractiveness it was admitted that Eveline Lonsdale was perfectly competent on all occasions to take care of herself.

Clarence took in the picture as he halted in the entrance —the half-closed eyes that met his own demurely, the green leaves for a background, and the shapely form partly swathed in the yielding canvas. It was an attractive one,

and for a few moments he regretted the limit. Then, being difficult to turn aside from a purpose, he remembered what was due to both of them.

"I have a quarrel with you, Clarence," said the girl. "And as you know I believe in frankness I desire to learn how I have incurred your displeasure."

"You could never do that," said Clarence, and Eveline laughed merrily.

"I have offended a few people in my time," she said. "Well, we will change the question—why have you with deliberate intent avoided me? We used to be good friends. I want the truth, and not indifferent compliments. One does not like to lose a pleasant companion."

The merriment still lingered in her voice, but there was a challenge in her glance, and Clarence was not accustomed to ignore a challenge, so he nerved himself to face the difficulty, answering, "I would sooner not answer off-hand. Can you let not it pass?"

"No," said Eveline seriously. "I believe in the daring veracity which puts His Satanic Majesty to shame, and demand the explanation."

"Then you shall have it, but please wait a moment," and Markham, whose face expressed a curious mixture of hesitation and resolve, rolled a green tub partly filled with water against the door.

"Whatever are you doing?" asked the girl; and Clarence answered drily, "Economy has become chronic since the price of the horse brand oil went down. There is no latch to the door, and I have set the tub there so that all entering will announce their presence by falling over it."

"But they might hurt themselves," persisted Eveline, who, having deliberately provoked the crisis, began to feel anxious regarding her companion, and Clarence answered doggedly, "I don't care if they do, so long as they make noise enough. You and I must have a serious talk, Evie."

He looked harassed, the girl deliciously tranquil, and there was a silence during which the man snipped off the fronds of a choice fern which was the pride of his hostess. Eveline, although she had not encountered hitherto the young man she could not vanquish in a battle of wits, did

not enjoy this interlude, particularly as the tub cut off any hope of a dignified retreat. "Why don't you begin?" she asked.

Clarence wrenched a fern root up bodily, for this was just what he did not know how to do; then said awkwardly, "You are more fortunate than many girls, Evie; you are so sensible as well as pretty."

"Thank you!" and the speaker hoped she was going to maintain her tranquillity all through. "It is always gratifying to be called sensible. It is useful, too."

"Yes," said Clarence hurriedly. "And it is so convenient. One can always talk to sensible people. Now I never met any——"

"Please omit the compliments," Eveline interposed demurely. "Suppose we take them for granted, and you proceed a little further."

Clarence was slightly staggered. He had not expected this matter-of-fact coolness, and did not know that in such matters his companion's intuitions were better than his own clouded wits. Nevertheless, he was trying to do his duty according to his lights.

"I wonder if I need tell you that family interests point to one thing. And any man might be proud that it was so. Need I make it clearer? I am trying to do the right thing, and you will forgive me if I blunder; but folks will take so much for granted. For your sake, Evie, I felt murderously inclined towards one or two of them!"

Eveline Lonsdale realised perfectly what he was leading up to. She was also relieved by the knowledge, but there was in her a strain of somewhat reckless mischief, and she determined that if any one must be made uncomfortable by the approaching climax it should be the man. Accordingly she answered, "So have I. There is no use pretending stupidity. It has been made plain to me that unfortunately genuine friendship is difficult under the circumstances; but the expectations of my relatives are a matter of indifference to me."

It thereupon devolved on Clarence to define his own, which grew increasingly difficult, and in desperation he flung himself into the chair beside her, and grasping one little hand, held it fast upon his knee. "We have been

such good friends, Evie, and this cannot continue. You must know your own value—sweetness, grace, and position—and, in all sincerity, I am scarcely fit to talk to you. I am a poor man, and a tempted one—and it isn't fair to you."

He looked at her appealingly, and Clarence was handsome as well as poor. Eveline understood and admired him in spite of a certain instinctive pique, but she answered quite irrelevantly, "I would like that flower under the roof. Will you get it for me."

Clarence, bewildered, proceeded to do her bidding, but the blossom evaded his efforts, even when assisted by a rake. So he climbed on to the rails of a stage, which yielded beneath him, and descended amid a crash of broken crockery. When he turned to survey the ruin he had perpetrated Eveline's chair was empty. She stood beside a door at the further end of the conservatory, saying, "I will leave you to explain what has happened to startled inquirers, and thank you. But it was abrupt, unexpected, and I must consider until to-morrow."

She vanished, locking the door behind her, and left Clarence confused and savage, afraid that he had blundered horribly.

"Where is Clarence?" asked Hilda Markham when Eveline rejoined the company, slightly flushed, and the girl made answer, "You will find him in the conservatory wrecking flower-pots. Unless somebody restrains him there will not be many left."

Clarence was not in the conservatory when his hostess inspected the ruin with indignation. He was tramping home under the stars, wondering whether he had made a prodigious fool of himself. He returned to Meadowside early next day, knowing that Eveline was fond of the morning freshness, and his heart beat fast when she came towards him smiling graciously. Looking straight at him, she said very simply, "Clarence, you are a good fellow, and honest too. I have been, and always will be, fond of you—but, once for all, what kind friends have decided for us is impossible. There, you have my answer, and I am grateful to you—but you need not be ostentatious in your relief."

The man long remembered the picture she made as she stood before him, fresh and dainty from the clusters of her sunny hair catching the early light to the glistening dew on her little feet. "I tried to do what I thought was imperative," he said. "Just because I admire you more than any woman I ever met, and would gain so much, I dare not offer you less than everything. Still, it was hard not to take the risks. Evie, you must know."

Eveline smiled softly. "That is so like a man; when anything becomes impossible, then he longs for it. But we will dismiss the subject for ever when you have told your friends. Perhaps I used a clumsy expedient, but I could trust you; and when folks resist all but sledge-hammer tactics one must try to oblige them. As you said, the position was growing intolerable."

So the question was settled, and, such is human nature, for a time Clarence Markham abused his fate bitterly.

## VI

### MARKHAM'S FORLORN HOPE

One bright morning, when even the dingy city looked cheerful under the sunlight which beat down through its pall of smoke, Northop Markham, whose forehead showed the wrinkles of anxious thought, sat in his office talking to his son. Clarence also looked serious, and his voice betrayed what the sacrifice had cost him as he said, "It is too late now, sir, when I have sent in my papers, and there is no use repining over what can't be helped. I could neither live on my pay nor wait in the expectation of stepping into a dead man's shoes. Besides, when you are hard pressed it's my manifest duty to help you. I have no commercial training, but I can handle men, and if you had the post empty I might save you an agent's salary."

Northop Markham was affected, knowing his son had shown promise of shining in his profession. "You have

my sincere gratitude, Clarence," he said. "As to going out to the coast, I could almost say 'God forbid,' and it requires experience to fill the post of an agent. I wonder if you quite realise how hardly men live out there. I am as sorry as you are that you had to resign your commission, with your step in view, but we must make the best of it, if there is any best in the whole weary affair. You must give me time to consider."

"I hope you can decide quickly. Wilfred Lyle introduced me to his brother, a man I have already a great liking for. He made some money in British Columbia, and if I can't be useful in West Africa I feel tempted to return with him. We have talked about it together."

"I will see what I can do. I had hoped you would serve the nation, but there will be a worse break in family traditions when the last of the Thornton property is sold out to save its owner from bankruptcy."

"Is it so bad as that, sir?" and Markham answered sadly, "I am afraid it will be. I have had to sacrifice part of my oil at considerably less than it cost me. Owing to my rivals' actions I have had abnormal expenses during the last two years, expenses which only large profits would meet, and now the price will shortly touch an unprecedented figure. Touch that button, and I'll tell you the latest quotation."

"Good oil freely offered at a further three shillings down!" said a clerk. "The opposition men are open to sell forward at slightly under that figure."

"Tell Allen to cut two-and-sixpence," said Markham, and when the clerk withdrew added, "Disaster appears certain. My rivals hold me with my back against the wall, and would laugh at any offer of a compromise, while, though oil was never so low, any further decline would probably necessitate me calling my creditors together. The only consolation is that the other side are losing heavily."

Clarence laid his hand on his father's in mute sympathy, while his face grew stern; but any one glancing at the pair would have guessed that the victors would have cause to remember the struggle before either were beaten down. Half-an-hour passed. Markham busied himself with his

papers and Clarence was silent; then a clerk appeared to say, "A gentleman called Cummings to see you, sir. States he has something of importance to communicate."

Markham nodded, and a heavily built, bull-necked man was shown in. He was dressed in neat blue serge, but pallid face and ingrained hands indicated his calling, and he brought with him a subtle fragrance of the engine-room. He coolly seated himself in the most comfortable chair, stretched his feet out, and commenced nonchalantly, "Must introduce myself—Alexander Cummings, marine engineer, lately donkey-man on board the *Manyama*. Mr. Northop Markham, I presume? I want a private interview."

Clarence rose, but his father raised his hand. "That is my name, sir, and what concerns my business will interest this gentleman. Will you be good enough to explain your visit?"

"I will," was the cool answer. "Wasn't brought up to be bashful, and that's just what I came for. Very glad to meet you. One of your agents, Heron, was good to me, which is why I am offering you a secret for five hundred pounds the Amalgamation would give two thousand for."

"You may as well ask five thousand at once; you're equally likely to get it."

The stranger smiled, saying, "It's dirt cheap at the money, but I'm indebted to you, and hearing you were being screwed down by the opposition thought I'd like to help you."

Clarence glared at the speaker, but his father answered, "That was very kind of you, but similar proposals have almost grown monotonous to me."

"I'm not trying to rob you," said the visitor, leaning forward to reach his hat. "I see you don't believe me, but it's as true as the gospel that what I know is worth thousands of pounds to you. Still, I'm not going down on my knees to any man living. I know where to find mahogany equal to the best Central American, and if you don't want it I'll try the Amalgamation. Before I go, just look at this, and see what you're missing."

He laid several small pieces of wood upon the table, and Markham picked them up, half-convinced, for there

was a ring of sincerity in the stranger's words. "Colour good; grain close and hard! At least, it's better than the best shipped from the Gold Coast," he said. "Wait a little. You know where to find plenty of this?"

"Whole forests! Close to deep water, and within a week's tow of a navigable river." And Markham's eyes were eager as he said, "To begin with, I have not five hundred pounds I have not a use for, and to continue, adopting a homely phrase, I never buy a pig in a poke. My reputation should, however, be a guarantee that you can trust me, and you would have to be content with my promise to give you a fair percentage on the results if I made any use of your information."

Cummings hesitated, then answered recklessly, "I'd sooner trust your word than the other parties' contract. Sit still, and don't interrupt me until I've told the whole story."

The pair did so, Markham senior never taking his eyes off the narrator save when he noted something on a scrap of paper, Clarence with growing excitement, until he waited his father's answer in breathless suspense when Cummings said, "Well?"

"If all this is quite authentic I think I can promise you five hundred pounds bonus besides a percentage—when you have earned it," it came. "I must, however, think the matter over and cable Heron. Keep all you have told me secret, and come back at this hour to-morrow."

Cummings departed, and Clarence said, "That is a hope at least, sir."

"It is. Our forlorn hope, for if I'm a judge of character that man's tale is true. But it means a heavy risk. King Shotille is a cunning rascal, and the cost of the necessary expedition would be large. With great difficulty I might just raise funds enough, but success would justify anything. Also, I see an opening for you, because if I placed the matter in the hands of my agents the Amalgamation would spare no pains to discover my object and double my bid to Shotille. Attempts have been made to find hardwood accessible from tide-water already. Once I get a signed concession I can't help thinking there is actually a fortune in it. Therefore I want a resolute man unknown on the coast; two would be better."

"One is ready," said Clarence, "and the other will be. With your consent I could secure the co-operation of Edward Lyle, Wilfred's brother. He's an invincible, tireless, cast-iron Colonial. I'd give my life for a chance of helping you through with this venture, sir!"

"I believe you—and am grateful. Now I must set the cable talking, and consider a good many details before to-morrow."

"Allen sold a small lot at your figure, sir," said the clerk, putting his head in. "Since then a broker quoted one shilling under. Here's the Amalgamation man to see you."

Clarence retired before the visitor. He was the man who had called before, and came to the point at once. "You're losing heavily, Markham, and we have a much longer purse than you. Well, of course, there's no use recapitulating painful facts, and business is business, you know. Frankly, it comes to this: we might be willing to take over your factories, and remaining stock at current prices, value of the factories to be calculated on a basis of the last two years' profits and turnover, and allow you a small bonus on a guarantee not to trade again in The Rivers."

"Then you're wasting time," said Markham. "I'm not quite beaten yet. As you know, the last two years' profits have been *nil*, but I'm hoping to revalue those factories at a premium. Accordingly, my answer is—well, I don't want to hurt your feelings."

"We haven't got any, according to some people," was the smiling answer. "Do—we'll say your worst, I suppose, and we probably will. Sorry you don't leave us any option," and the visitor withdrew, saying to himself as he did so, "I wonder what old Ironsides has got up his sleeve."

It was two days later when Clarence set out for Thornton Dene, taking Alexander Cummings with him because his father said, "That man has a weakness, and a bottle of whisky too much might spoil everything. The last penny I can raise, even by selling Thornton, will hardly suffice, and we can run no unnecessary risks. You can also sound your friend Lyle, but be careful. If this scheme miscarries there will be nothing left between us and abject defeat."

On arriving at Thornton Markham found an invitation

to assist in shooting several covers waiting him, and as it promised to be his last relaxation of the kind he accepted it. He sought Lyle the preceding day, and spent some time with him discussing the mahogany concession scheme. The venture appealed to the Colonial, but he did not immediately offer to participate in it.

"There are few things would suit me better. I'm tired of doing nothing, and my interests are safe in my partner's hands," he said. "But I can't give you an answer yet. Why? Well, there are reasons that don't concern myself alone, and I have something to settle which may either render it impossible or at once decide me. You must try to wait a few days or so."

"I won't press you," said Clarence stiffly. "Of course, it is a risky business, and the results problematical;" but the other answered, "Stop right there. We don't let steeper chances hold us off when there's anything worth the getting in the Mountain Province. If it's possible, I'll join you."

Both men, for different reasons, remembered the following day—Clarence because it was his last day's pleasure in England, and it was with a heavy heart he tramped up the valley. The air was still and clear, with a faint chill of frost in the shadow of the firs, but the fallen beech leaves shimmered crimson, the birch trunks silver, and a ridge of sombre pines formed a fit setting for the dainty blending of greys and russet shades in Roughton Wood. Markham, who noticed all this, remembered that the retreat in which he had spent so many happy days would be sold to strangers before he set foot on British soil again.

There was a constant whirring of feathered bodies athwart the lichened trunks and scurrying of tiny feet over the red carpet of fallen leaves as the beaters came tapping through the wood, and Lyle, who had learned to handle the gun as well as rifle in a region where the poorer settlers cannot afford to waste costly ammunition, shot his best that day. He had been stationed at what proved to be a particularly warm corner, and his nearest neighbour watched the sinewy figure, knee-deep in yellow fern, with envy, for, whether it was bolting rabbit or clattering pheasant, very little passed the gun it held. The one

rolled over in its track and lay there, the other rushed earthwards, leaving a puff of feathers floating behind, and no hangman's work remained to be done.

"May I compliment you?" said the neighbour when the pattering shots rang further along the line. "Where did you learn that kind of shooting?"

"In a land where we had to hold straight or often go hungry," said Edward carelessly. "We shot, as a matter of necessity, for the pot, and I was glad to earn my living with the rifle occasionally."

The other, whose grandfather had made his living for him, stiffened suddenly, and Clarence, who heard the parley through a screen of willows, laughed. At last, looking up the hillside, Lyle noticed Eveline Lonsdale cross a sloping meadow, and hurried in that direction when the shooters dispersed. He overtook her under the edge of a fir wood, where the afternoon sun was fairly warm, and for a time she sat on a fallen trunk, looking down into the valley, while Lyle leaned against the split-oak fence watching her. He had seen many landscapes in his wanderings, both desolate and grand, but never, he thought, so desirable a maiden.

As it happened, their conversation turned upon the respective merits of a life of simple contentment and the struggle to realise a wholesome ambition, and at first Lyle talked well. He had studied practical philosophy in the hard school of Colonial experience, and remembered what he read, as men do who march fifty miles to borrow a coveted book. Meanwhile, he was considering whether it would be justifiable to ask a gently reared woman to share the discomforts of even his prosperous ranch in the bush. He had asked himself the same question over and over again, and while reason returned one answer his hopes suggested another might be possible.

At last, trying to assume an indifference that was not natural, he said, "As an example, do you mind telling me, Miss Lonsdale, the simplest life that would content you?"

The girl's eyes were troubled as for a moment she glanced at the mosses at her feet, but when she turned to look up at him she smiled lightly, answering, "It is a

curious question, and we were discussing the subject in the abstract. Why should I tell you?"

Lyle longed to explain fully, but refrained for the present. "It is sheer presumption," he said; "but I would like to know."

Had he been gifted with clearer insight he might have recognised a trace of mischief in the answer, instead of listening with growing dismay as Eveline, looking past him, said, "Then, as my tastes are simple, I will make a confession. I should like to live alternately in the country and London; in the former life in such an old-world place as Thornton Hall would be delightful. One would need a good saddle horse or two in the country, and congenial society, with access to the best that music, art, and the drama could give, in town. With such solaces I think any simple-minded young woman could be happy. It is, of course, possible I shall not achieve them."

Lyle groaned inwardly, and could not induce his companion to meet his gaze as he asked, "Forgive a further intrusion, but would happiness be impossible without all this, if—if, for instance, a man who was too poor to gratify all your wishes, but would be content to spend his life trying to do so, should ever find favour with you? Miss Lonsdale, there is one who would count no toil or risk too heavy if the result brought you happiness. It is a great thing for me to ask, but——"

Eveline silenced him with a gesture, and in spite of a heightened colour answered gently, "That is another question, but I will try to answer you. Our tastes are the result of custom and environment, and one can hardly be held responsible for them, but unhappiness generally seems to follow those who needlessly break away from the life they are used to. Hitherto the temptation you gracefully allude to has not come in my way. If it did I should need first to be wholly sure of the man, and would expect an earnest of his promise in the shape of proportionate deeds. Meanwhile, it would perhaps save both of us needless distress if you returned to the abstract: I do not wish to answer any more questions of that nature."

Lyle's experience of women was limited, and he had dwelt among a people who, regarding no man's opinion,

expressed their sentiments with painful directness. So he only sighed when the girl added, "Believe me; I am wisest. We were wandering beyond our depth, and it is only fair that I should turn inquisitor now. What is the life that would suit you?"

"The kind I shall probably get. Struggle from dawn to dusk the short year through against frost and heat, hard rock and giant trees. Yes, you are right, and one deserves due punishment for shirking the work he is meant to do. But this is too serious a topic for me to discuss except in earnest, and, if I may not break the command you laid on me, say just this I will. If those things will give you pleasure, and my strength does not fail me, you shall have at least the option of refusing them. I might have called them poor things, but how could they be poor if they ministered to your happiness? Now I have finished, and will distress you no more."

Eveline watched the speaker with veiled approval. He had straightened himself to his full height and knit together the fingers of a very sinewy hand. The toil-developed, muscular figure and the bronzed face with its expression of deadly earnestness were both expressive of more than primitive force and courage, and Eveline, who feared little, could have feared this man save for the swift obedience he had shown even to her caprices, which appealed to her. "Is it not getting cold for you? The sun has gone," he said.

Lyle rejoined the Thornton party, and when he had spoken to Clarence the latter stretched out his hand as he said, "I'm coming with you to find that mahogany. I made my mind up in a hurry to-day, and I'll go down to arrange matters with your father whenever it suits you. I'm open to sink most of my possessions in the venture, but I give you fair warning that once started I mean to go right through. It will be no African picnic with me, but a case of coming back successful or staying right there."

The pledge each gave the other was to be faithfully redeemed, and Clarence answered with a gravity which of late had become habitual with him, "I'm glad to hear you say so. In confidence, I may tell you that my father's commercial existence and my sisters' future depend on

our success. You do not think I should be lightly turned aside with all that at stake, do you?"

Meanwhile Eveline Lonsdale paced homewards slowly over velvet mosses, and between the many-tinted beech trunks in the wood, whose beauties, however, were lost upon her. "Perhaps I was foolish," she reflected, standing still a moment ankle-deep in russet leaves, and added with a slight quiver of the lips that was neither a smile nor a sigh, "But one must be sure, and he will accomplish something and come back if he is the man I think him."

That night Edward said to his brother, "I'm going away shortly, Wilfred. You have given me a good time, and I'm grateful; but this life is too tame for me, and I'm going out with Markham to Africa. I have reasons I can't quite make clear for deciding so hurriedly."

When Wilfred Lyle told his wife, she received the news with equanimity. "I really think Edward is right, and it is time he went," she said. "Your brother has his strong points, but there is rather too much untrammelled energy in his composition, and he has kept me in a state of nervous expectancy. In fact, I have reasons for believing he would have been locked up for poaching had he stayed much longer."

"I wonder what they're after," said Lyle, with a meditative air. "West Africa isn't the place any sane person visits for pleasure, and I can't see any possible reason to take Ted there. He didn't think it necessary to enlighten me."

A few days later he drove over to Meadowside and mentioned his brother's departure incidentally.

"I wonder Clarence did not tell me," said Eveline, when the visitor departed. "Yes—it was characteristic, what one would expect him to do. Gone at a word—even modern civilisation has not killed chivalry. But he might have said good-bye to me."

So Eveline Lonsdale did her part in despatching two men to Africa on a perilous quest. A woman's fancy and the fall of a shilling had between them much to answer for.

## VII

### DISILLUSION

Two months had passed since his departure from Thornton when one afternoon Clarence Markham leaned over the R.M.S. *Kinsembo's* rail as that vessel, heaving her full bows high out of the shimmering swell, closed slowly with the Kroo coast of Western Africa. It rose over her port hand, a loom of flat-topped hills against the yellow heat haze that suffused the northern horizon, and in the foreground belts of sombre forest rolling down to the palm-crowned bluffs above a glistening beach on which the heave of the South Atlantic broke with a drowsy roar.

Every piece of brasswork flashed with dazzling light, the faint air that set the awnings fluttering brought with it a hot spicy smell, and already a string of frail canoes came shooting out from shore. Clarence, however, glanced from them to the pocket-book in his hand, in which he had noted his father's instructions. The first was that he must as far as possible conceal his connection with the well-known firm, and while Lyle had booked a passage for himself and two assistants Clarence was known on board by his mother's name, Seaton, which had been given him in baptism.

"I regret the necessity for keeping your identity in the background," the merchant said. "But we are fighting a powerful combination, and while its leaders are in their own way honourable men a number of its subordinates are not. Once it became known the venture was mine they would spare no effort to circumvent you, and would probably buy up Shotille over your head."

Next, he was to purchase all provisions from the Amalgamation factories, conferring with Heron, who had been posted by mail, as an acquaintance made on the spot; and thirdly, to keep his intentions and destination a close secret. This, Markham said, would be the more easy because many trading adventurers were just then exploiting the lower reaches of the rivers.

The canoes came nearer, and Clarence became aware that

he was not the only spectator. A slender figure in a thin black dress, most unsuitable to that temperature, also leaned upon the rail. It was outlined against a slope of green translucent brine one moment and the blue of the sky the next, for the *Kinsembo* was light in ballast and rolled distressfully. The woman was watching the approaching craft with such interest that she did not move until he was close beside her; then, as she turned at the sound of his steps, Clarence saw a face which was interesting as well as delicately pretty. Adversity and an acquaintance with sorrow had worn the bloom of youth from off it prematurely, but had left in compensation a gravity he found attractive, and a suggestion of energy which had its origin in the mind rather than the body, for the form looked very fragile in the severe black dress.

The eyes were clear and brown, hair of the same colour stirred in the hot draught above the broad forehead, the mouth looked nervous, and the restless movements of the thin fingers on the rail told the same tale. As a matter of fact, Florence Ellory, who though still young in point of years had left all that pertained to girlhood behind, was highly strung, and of the emotional temperament which, if subject to occasional relapses into hopeless dejection, is perhaps also the most capable of heroic action. She was a woman of simple and severe religious conceptions, and was going, so she hoped, to take part in the regeneration of Africa, which is a task demanding qualities possessed by very few women, and those usually of a more even-tempered and phlegmatic kind.

"This will be my first glimpse of the heathen natives, Mr. Seaton, and I am anxious to see them," she said. "I have often tried to picture the poor simple people whom we have treated so cruelly."

"Do you think so?" asked Clarence, trying not to smile, for both his father and Cummings had portrayed negro character under quite a different aspect. Florence Ellory, however, answered steadfastly, "Who could help doing so, when one remembers how they are victimised by unscrupulous white traders, who ruin them soul and body to make a profit on their shiploads of poisonous gin? Can you deny that it is an iniquitous commerce?"

The speaker paused a moment, and then looked at her companion with kindling eyes as she continued, "But a time will come when we will do the African justice, teaching him useful arts instead of poisoning him and shedding his blood. In some of our stations we have achieved it in a measure already, and it is a comfort to know I shall find quiet and industrious converts waiting for me. I am, as you know, on my way to teach at Warrimba, in the swamps of the lower Niger," and she added, with a trace of shyness, "I did not intend to slight your profession when I mentioned bloodshed. Force cannot perhaps be dispensed with yet. I forgot you were a soldier."

Clarence bent his head with a reassuring smile. Habit is strong, and for the moment he forgot he was no longer a soldier, but one of the very traders who according to his companion were scattering degradation broadcast over Africa. He did not point out that there are two sides to every question, and that neither traders nor missionaries were as free from, occasionally unjustifiable, prejudice against each other as they might be. He had grown interested in Miss Ellory during the voyage, and even strong opinions upon the subject of commercial morality did not hurt him when expressed by her lips. Some small ship-board courtesy had served as introduction, and, because his comrades always addressed him as Seaton, Florence, in common with the rest of the passengers, did the same. He could not hide the results of his training, and was accordingly supposed to be one of the many young military officers going out to serve the Government.

The foremost canoes were almost alongside now, and wild black men rose upright in each, howling excitedly as they sent the slender, knife-edge hulls racing towards the steamer. There was not room about the gangway for half of them when the engines stopped, and, because the negro has no idea of order and recognises only the right of the strongest hand, pandemonium broke loose below. The light shells of cottonwood crashed into each other, several rolled over, and the sea was dotted by swimmers' heads, whilst the last arrivals strove to urge their craft through or over the others, and failing to do so brought their paddles down thudding on the nearest naked body. Then

out of the splashing, shouting, and welter of hurled-up foam, appeared muscular men with blue stripes down their foreheads, some attired in the costume of Eden, and others wearing a foot or two of wet cotton swathed about their waists. They poured in through the gangway, or leapt down over the rail, and most swarmed forward to barter with the seamen who kept a general store in the forecastle, while the rest fought with each other for the right of vending strips of carved ivory or quaint calabashes to the passengers.

Two mates armed with handspikes endeavoured to keep the bolder spirits from looting everything portable off the deck, and a bronzed white man in a big sun helmet, who had questioned the steward, accosted Clarence.

"You're Mr. Seaton M. Know who owns the crowned horse brand—eh?" and when Clarence nodded the stranger continued, "Then I've got your men in accordance with Heron's cable. It's that particularly wild crowd yonder—warranted free from civilisation, except a little steamboat English, and most of them fighting men. That's the kind to stand by you in a tight place. I had some trouble over it, because another fellow from Sarleon came along earlier and took fifty of them up the Niger. He went back to Freetown without one, and as the bushmen don't know whether he shot or sold them the guileless Kroo is getting suspicious. Of course, they're consigned to Heron, and you'll engage them from him, but we'll open the usual bottle in your cabin. I recognise two of the Amalgamation's agents, and they might scent a rat if they saw me talking too much to you."

Clarence ran his eyes over the group indicated, as did Lyle and Cummings, who joined him, and when they sat in his state-room the Colonial said, "So that's the pagan Krooboy who does all the hard work along this coast. Looks a tolerably active sort of man—blue stripe on his forehead, fine arms and shoulders, crispest woolly hair. But they're eccentric in their notions, aren't they?"

"Yes," said Heron's correspondent. "Like most other men, the Kroo is a combination of contradictory qualities, and it all depends on how you handle him. Treat him the wrong way, and he'll steal with any man, and probably

poison you; treat him well, with a touch of the strong hand, and he'll not only respect your property but steal your neighbours' shirts for you, and in spite of some folks' opinions fight like a wild cat if he's wanted to. Oh yes, he's a good-humoured, staunch and fickle, honest kind of rogue, who can either run like a hare or walk right into Brimstone behind the right leader, and by the look of you——" here the speaker raised his glass to Lyle, "he ought to follow the crowned horse company. Well, there's the 'Stand by,' and I must be going."

A mad clamour commenced overhead, and when they reached the deck a rush of wild figures streamed aft, carrying boxes of cotton reels, pomade bottles, and similar sundries, while several irate seamen who had received nothing in return pursued them. Some of the runners snatched up the property of the black passengers, or any small objects that came handy on the way, and leapt out headlong through the gangway. One giant with sharply filed teeth grabbed Miss Ellory's shawl, which lay on a deck chair beside her; but just as the telegraph clanged out, "Ahead slow," Clarence dropped through the opening in the rail after him. As luck would have it, he alighted in a canoe which did not overturn, and saw the robber's head rise out of the water, followed by a black hand still clutching the shawl. Then, as the negro essayed to crawl into the canoe, twining his hands in the woolly hair, he bumped his thick cranium against its side. The thief promptly loosed the shawl, and the white man grasping it jumped for the trailing gasswarp, a coir rope hung out for boats to hold on by, as the long wall of iron plates commenced to forge past him.

His hand closed on it, and he hung by one arm towing by a slackened bight of the rope from the knees downwards in the sea. A deck-hand leaning down from the channels caught his shoulder, there was a lift and a scramble, and Clarence stood breathless but safe on board, while when he rejoined Miss Ellory, who had witnessed the occurrence, he found her standing behind a big white lifeboat with her eyes misty and her lips trembling.

"You were very kind, Mr. Seaton. For a few moments I was frightened horribly, and I don't know how to thank

you," she commenced; and Clarence answered lightly, "You can do so by letting me find a comfortable chair for you and hang the shawl up in the sun to dry. I am very sorry, but I couldn't help that rascal soaking it."

He wrung it out, and the shawl was certainly soaked, as was part of his own clothing. It was also apparently ruined, for it was of the commonest and cheapest material, and a feminine observer might have deduced various things by a glance at it. Clarence, however, naturally did not, and fidgeted when his companion said with a suspicious unevenness, "It was not worth your running the slightest risk for, but I had not a better one, and you must believe that I am grateful."

Next, to the man's astonishment, she turned her head away, and he caught a stifled sob, whereat his own face flushed, for he felt it was incumbent on him to comfort her, and was blankly ignorant how to do it.

"Those wretched black fellows have frightened you, Miss Ellory," he said. "No, it must have been the sun. It's hot enough to upset any one, and I should have kept you beneath the awnings. I will bring you a glass of iced wine in a minute."

The girl's face was hidden, but her shoulders still heaved, and Clarence laid his hand gently on her arm. "You must really let me do something. I am so sorry you are ill."

"Please leave me alone," a choking voice said. "I am per-perfectly well, and you men are so foolish. You think that wine will cure everything. Now," and the speaker with an effort raised an indignant and half-ashamed face, "you ought to know that drink is wicked."

"Iced lemonade is innocent enough in any case," said Clarence, vanishing, and when he returned thrilled with pleasure as Florence, looking very pitiful and forlorn in the hot black dress, gulped down a few mouthfuls of the cool beverage gratefully.

Clarence felt unusually compassionate, and drawing a deck chair near set down the small lump of ice and bottle. "You shall not have any more until you tell me what has troubled you, or promise to let me bring the doctor," he said. "Oh, I remember; ice is good for incipient sun-stroke, and with your permission I'll wrap a little bit in

my handkerchief and you can put it down the back of your neck. Let me see, it ought to be applied near the top of the cerebral column, or I believe that was what the handbook said. There !—but it looks horribly drippy, doesn't it ? "

Florence seemed divided between hysterical laughter and a desire to escape, but with a swift glance at his face read only genuine solicitude, and in a few moments had recovered command of herself. " Please don't be foolish; I haven't got sunstroke—or anything," she said. " Really, I am quite well. I am only ashamed. It was so childish and cowardly, but I could not help it. I never thought the Africans were like—like those fearful men. The photographs I saw of them showed mild and industrious people. They were so very different and—and—they all wore clothes."

She blushed becomingly. Clarence, stubbornly repressing his inclinations, looked almost suspiciously grave, and the uneven voice grew clearer as the speaker continued. " You may not understand, Mr. Seaton. You are a soldier, who must have seen so much. I am only a woman who has always lived in a sheltered home—and it was overwhelming. What could any poor woman do among those awful savages ! "

Clarence understood perfectly. The first sight of the untamed African pagan had impressed him, but he felt that moral reflections would hardly become his years. So, stretching his hand along the back of her chair to steady it as the steamer rolled, and it was somewhat difficult to keep it on the varnished timber, he answered, " I think I know—and you have my best sympathy. I would like to help you, and if it is ever possible you must tell me how. Now you will finish the lemonade, and then sit still and read the book I will bring you."

In half-an-hour he left her tranquil again, and that evening the elderly purser said to him, " I can't have you making love to my special *protégée*, Seaton. She's a long way too good for you, and, if she wasn't, by the time she has got over her evangelistic ardour the malaria will have translated her out of reach of further trouble. It's an infernal shame to send any young Englishwoman to that

ghastly country; but she's enthusiastic, and what could the poor thing do? Her father, a hard-up clergyman, died suddenly; wife, left with several daughters, followed him; and with a little training this forlorn waif was shipped off to the missions. Anyway, I won't stand any nonsense, and if Rowlands and his wife are blind I'm not, you see."

"I think you are both premature and presuming on my good temper," said Clarence stiffly.

He saw more of Miss Ellory as the steamer rolled eastwards along the surf-battered beaches of the fever coast, but as she did not again allude to his profession he had no opportunity of correcting her assumption that he was an officer, which was perhaps unfortunate. She thanked him for many small kindnesses when she disembarked at a desolate collection of mud-huts with a whitewashed building among them at the mouth of a muddy river, and Clarence sighed as he watched the surf-boat paddle ashore, thinking he had seen the last of her, in which he was mistaken. He and his party were landed in the neighbouring Silver River, and offered to hire portion of an Amalgamation factory managed by the youthful agent Wilkinson for their accommodation until they could organise an expedition up river.

"I don't keep an hotel, but with our confounded audits I really can't pretend to offer unlimited hospitality. If you'll give me a decent store order I'll take you in—and if you peg out here see you decently buried," said Wilkinson, with the grim jocularity with which the West African delights to welcome the new arrival. "What was it brought you—backing the wrong gee-gee, creditors, or wanted a change of air, eh?"

"We are not asking a favour," said Clarence coldly. "If you can do anything for us on a commercial basis I'm open to deal with you. Otherwise, we'll try a Markham factory. We will also endeavour to convince you of the folly of any more impertinence."

"Can't afford to let any business pass into his hands. Markham's a blamed pirate who has no right on our rivers, and his men might poison and rob you," explained the agent, unabashed. "Come in, and if you're so independent I'll try to charge you through the sundries as high as they

would in a London hotel. Good heavens, Cummings! Is that you? I thought you were dead, or had made yourself some hinterland sultan's chief armourer long ago."

"I very nearly did," said Cummings with a grin. "I'm going to try it again, taking these gentlemen with me," and through his ignorance of African geography he did Markham a service, for the land of the Moslem sultans lies far up the Niger, and beyond the operations of the Amalgamation. Several days later, while he fitted together the steel launch they brought out in sections, Clarence and Lyle sat in a sweltering consulate, talking to the soldier who ruled that turbulent district in the name of the Protectorate. It stood raised on piles beside a broad river, while the sandy compound beneath it was walled in on one side by forest and on the other by the whitewashed barracks of the Yoruba soldiery. Major Carwardine was military commander, justice of the peace, postmaster, and collector of customs all in one. He was also a gravely spoken, unassuming man, whose name was nevertheless feared and respected on the rivers, for both unruly natives and white traders who tried to cheat the revenue knew that his hand was as heavy as his patience was long. There are also a good many like him in the fever-land, as well as a few of the more ornamental and less useful species.

"I am sorry I cannot do anything to assist you, or even give you a pass to enter the blockaded river in the meantime," he said. "King Shotille is inclined to kick over the traces, and, besides reviving some iniquitous customs, has practically defied us. One of his neighbours, King Okambo, also seems to be preparing to make war on Shotille. We have sent them both warning, but the presence of any white man might lead to complications just now, and if you were made prisoners it would need a strong expedition to release you. This would precipitate the very crisis we wish to avoid. Therefore you must wait."

Clarence was staggered, but, trying to master his dismay, said, "I have been trained as a soldier, and fancy I could take care of my party, sir. Any delay would practically ruin our project, and the consequences would be serious."

"I'm sorry, but cannot help it," the officer answered, with a trace of irony. "Even commercial interests must give way when it benefits the State, and the consequences are serious already. As to your being a soldier, that is a disadvantage. The first necessity is to preserve the peace."

"But can you make no possible exception, sir?" and the officer answered, "No, I can only promise to respect your confidence, and advise you when I consider the creeks safe again. That, however, may not be for several months."

They went out silently, and adjourning to Heron's factory held a solemn counsel. "It seems to me we must either abandon everything or go on in spite of him," said Lyle. "I don't know much about Africa, but the latter will be my choice, if I go alone."

"And mine!" said Clarence, while Cummings smote the table with his great fist as he answered, "The same with me. When in doubt, make the boldest move and luck will pull you through. Where we can't break through by open force guile will have to do, and it would take ten nigger kings to turn me back now."

"It's a serious thing to bluff the Protectorate officers," said Heron. "Still, I can't see much help for it. There's another big headman making ready to smash King Shotille, and between them they've paralysed all legitimate business. If I may say so, Mr. Markham, your father's purse will be tried severely unless you can get hold of the mahogany, and you might start up river bound for somewhere else, and then double on your tracks again. Of course, the risks are heavy, but the profits would be heavy too."

"We'll start in two days—up river," said Clarence. "There, that is settled, and now for the last time we'll be extravagant. Get out some of the crowned horse champagne. It's a memorable occasion and we'll drink success to Markham's forlorn hope!"

Sable kings had drunk of the vintage Heron produced from a case stencilled with the Markham horse, which the African accepted as a better guarantee than any seal affixed in France, and the four men stood up when Clarence said, "We start in two days, and when we come back

heaven only knows, but it won't be until our task is finished. I would like to remind you that we hold in our hands the credit of a name long famous on these rivers, and, in my case at least, failure may mean destitution to those we love at home. Therefore—whether all return or not—there must be no failure."

Clarence spoke with conviction, and one statement would have struck the man who despatched the expedition as strictly true, for the trio—eager young soldier, toil-hardened Colonial, and outcast wanderer of the seas—were all that now stood between an English family and destitution.

"Then here's for death or glory," cried Cummings, with a great laugh of exultation at the prospects of strife, as his glass rang splintering on the floor, and Lyle, who set his down, smiled drily, saying, "We're more careful of our crockery where I come from, but we'll stand solid behind what our chief has said."

## VIII

### UP RIVER

When the appointed day drew towards its close Markham's expedition was ready to start up river. Clarence had picked out a number of the strongest Krooboys and armed them with matchets and flintlock guns, though practical test had demonstrated that under most circumstances they made indifferent marksmen. Still, they satisfied him that if given sufficient time, and a rest for the long barrel, they could be depended on to fire a handful of broken cast-iron into an enemy at short range. This, he trusted, would not be necessary, but Heron pointed out that their presence might deter any small detachment of river pirates from breaking the peace. The rest he boarded out under Wilkinson's care, to wait until called for, and Cummings, with difficulty, got the picked men on board the launch.

They had acquired some experience of forest warfare stalking Liberian Customs officials and raiding their neighbours under Gallic rule on the Côte d'Ivoire.

The launch Cummings had fitted together was a low steel hull painted a dull grey, with the cream funnel adopted by those in the Government service and a condenser. The panting of the simpler high-pressure engine would have been heard nearly a mile away, but the condenser works more silently, and Markham senior surmised that it might not be convenient to announce the advent of the expedition to every negro in the vicinity. They were to follow a cargo steamer going the round of the higher factories, partly because the river was cumbered with shoals and also to conceal their actual destination, and when her lights crept up through the evening haze all was ready.

"Hello! Launch ahoy! Keep close upon our quarter if you're coming with us," a hail came down from the bridge, and when the tall black bow slid towards them Heron shook hands with Clarence as he said, "Don't let those fellows fancy you're not going straight on. Take the fourth large creek to port after she leaves you, and it will bring you back into Cummings' waterway. Mind, it's the fourth: the third goes that way too, but it leads past a Government post. Now it only remains for me to wish you the best of good luck."

He dropped into his gig, Cummings started the engines and the lights of the factory faded into the hot obscurity, while the dim bulk of the steamer moved on ahead, parting the muddy current into yeasty ripples, which broke noisily against the launch's bows. A moon hung low above the cottonwoods hemming the river in, but the haze which drifted out from among them dimmed the pale rays, and Clarence could only see the ghostly trunks sliding past him and two tall spars raking the narrow rift of indigo above. But there was plenty to hear—the boiling of the stream under iron bows, the lap of the white wake among countless mangrove withes, the chirruping of frogs, and an occasional unearthly scream which might have been made by some hunting beast. The deep throb of engines formed a monotonous undertone, save when it quickened or slackened at the clang of a gong, and Cummings, with

his hand on the throttle, followed its warnings—"Half-speed. Stand by. Stop her!"—which succeeded the splash of the plummet, and the leadsman's sing-song hail, "Better water—four fathom, sir!" or again, "Shoaling fast. Eighteen feet, sir!"

The crew of the launch had only to follow their leader, and they sat, for the most part silent, damped with dew in the cockpit, while the hours slipped past. None of them felt inclined to talk, and it was near the dawn when, as the steamer's helm went hard over at a bend of the waterway, Cummings, stopping his engines, said, "She's a long boat, and not steering too handy. They don't always get round these curves as neatly as they would like to."

It was a wise precaution, for next minute there was a heavy crash, followed by a great rustling and rending of green timber. Everything on board the steamer seemed to rattle, and listing over on one side she lay stationary, while a white welter tossed about her whirling screw.

"Stream caught her head and checked her swinging," Cummings explained. "I'm thinking she has plugged the forest hard. There's anywhere from six to sixteen feet of slime and water among those mangroves."

"Can we take you a rope out?" hailed Lyle, who had learned something of navigation chasing the seals in Northern seas; and a voice came back from the steamer, "No; we would only pull the whole forest up by the roots. If the engines won't back her clear we'll wait for high water. Better go ahead, and keep your eyes lifting for the half-fathom shoal."

Cummings re-started his engines, and it was burning noon next day when, after steaming dead slow for some hours, Markham's company found themselves in a quandary. Heron's directions—take the fourth large creek—seemed simple enough, but creeks of all sizes branched off the main channel, and when they had passed several dozen no one felt capable of deciding how many might be considered large ones. To add to their troubles the vacuum fell in the condenser, and Cummings stated that something must have jammed itself under a valve, and he would not answer for the engines much longer unless he could get at the ports for the circulating water, with the vessel dry

ashore. So all were glad when a canoe, containing a black man neatly dressed in white cotton, slid out of a creek, and its occupant hailed them, " Cappy Seegry, lib ? "

" Yes," shouted Clarence, who knew that " Cappy " was the generic title for any person of authority, though he was puzzled, and the negro, boarding them, seemed also surprised as he said, " Cappy Mulgrave say I dun wait for you, and bring you in, sah. He give me this book for you. But why you bring all them wild tief bushman ? "

He cast a glance of sovereign contempt at the Krooboys, who hearing the epithet " bushman " scowled back at him. There is little love lost between the untamed African and his quasi-civilised brother, while, as explained to the curious in the coast palaver, the term implies " one low nigger who dun wear no clothes and run naked in the bush same as monkey do ! " Meantime Clarence, glancing at the scribbled scrap of paper, read—

" Had to run down river, and won't be back for a week or two. Left a nigger for you who knows Okambo's country, or says he does. Make yourself at home in my quarters. Any friend of Mortimer's is welcome, even if I haven't seen him; but keep your eyes open—there's trouble in the bush."

Clarence beckoned his comrades forward, and when he showed it them Lyle said, " It's plain the Protectorate officer has been expecting a certain Seely, Seaby, perhaps even Seaton, lately arrived out, or he would have seen him. Now, of course, I wouldn't advocate it if we had any choice, but we must both put the steamer ashore in an accessible place and find the way into Shotille's river, so I don't see that any harm could follow our waiting a few hours at this outpost while Cummings makes his repairs. Practically, it can't be avoided. Cummings isn't sure of the creeks he passed in the dark."

Clarence was troubled, and answered reluctantly, " I suppose so. Events I never expected are forcing my hand for me. Still, if I explain there is a mistake we shall have a fast launch sent up after us, which must be avoided at any cost. No," he added, with a gesture of annoyance, " we must get the valve put right and then hurry on as soon as possible ! "

The negro, making fast his canoe, took the launch's helm, and some hours later they reached a little stockaded depôt, which, save for a few dusky servants and a black sergeant, was empty. Fortunately the Krooboys, speaking a different tongue, and knowing very little about the object of their journey, could not chatter, and the fact that the Government officers often travelled with a number of trail clearers and porters may have explained their presence to the soldier. White traders were also received there occasionally. Cummings worked hard at his engines, but it was evening when, after removing the obstruction, he had refitted them. The trio had insisted on dining on board the launch, but afterwards sought refuge from the sun in the house, where the black steward forced liquid refreshment upon them, and as they could not start until the moon was up, lounged in cane chairs on the verandah, Markham and Lyle in an airy costume of singlet and pyjamas.

The smell of mud and leaves and steaming earth was almost overpowering, and the saturated atmosphere affected their respiration. Inside the bare room behind them several suits of thin, sand-coloured uniform hung upon the wall, and huge beetles, spiders, and other insects rioted at will.

"I shall be glad to get on," said Clarence. "I feel most uncomfortable about accepting this man's hospitality under the circumstances, and have a haunting fear that something unexpected may happen at the last moment to complicate matters further. Are you sure your engines are all right, Cummings?"

"Yes," was the answer, and the mechanic mopped his soot-smeared face. "They're fit to race for a man's life, and I'm not sorry, for from what the black majordomo tells me they may have to. It appears some of Okambo's thieves are on the look-out not far away. We can start any time it's light enough. What do you think of the mosquitoes, Lyle?"

"Seen worse in my own country," said the Colonial. "It's Clarence they seem to enjoy most—completely spoiled his beauty already. Cummings, I think you ought to leave a little of Mulgrave's whisky."

"The main thing in life is to make the most of one's opportunities," answered the grinning engineer. "Mulgrave sends a letter saying make yourselves at home, and I'm trying to do it. In fact, a month in this place would suit me, and I've effected some improvements in his workshop already. He's got a small forge in the compound, and I dare say it comes in handy when the black men bust his launches up. I found one or two useful things in it!"

"Then you will put them back," Clarence broke in. "As it is, I should be ashamed to meet that officer, without looting his stores into the bargain. Put back everything."

The engineer made no answer, and there was silence for a space, because it was too hot to talk, until Lyle started as his trained ears caught a sound that came out of the black stillness. Nothing living seemed to move by forest or river that night. The sound increased until his comrade also heard it, and Clarence said, "It's a big canoe coming this way in a hurry. If it's any of the Government people they will want to send us seaward again. At any cost, I'm not going."

He sprang to his feet, but Lyle checked him, saying, "They generally travel in launches, don't they? Wait a few moments—there's the moon rising."

Clarence fumed with impatience, feeling much as a schoolboy does when caught red-handed at some petty larceny, as a broad disc swung up above the forest. Then, as the first bright beam fell glittering athwart the river, he rubbed his eyes and stared bewildered, for there were two feminine figures, beside a negro in black clothes, in the canoe which, with paddles glistening, shot round a bend.

"Women. Englishwomen, by all that's wonderful, and they're coming here!" he said.

"Then it's about time you two dressed yourselves," said Cummings with a chuckle; and Lyle broke in, "Confound it! We left our things aboard the launch, and they're almost abreast of the landing."

Cummings, who was attired in grimy overalls, chuckled again, and the two young men looked at each other in dismay, for the canoe shot in towards the piles which held the crab-tunnelled compound from sliding into the river.

"No help for it!" Lyle added. "You have just got

to play out the *rôle*. Get into one of those elegant tunics quick, while I try the other. You must choke them off, Cummings, at any price until we're ready."

Clarence groaned, but retiring within found a uniform which indifferently fitted him, while hardly had he donned it than Lyle gasped, "This thing was never made for a man like me—I can hear it splitting up the back already. Come here, for pity's sake, and help me to button the front of it."

A brief struggle followed. Two of the silver buttons came off, and Lyle stood up with the tunic, whose seams gaped, clinging like a glove to his ample chest, while his head was held bolt upright by the collar.

"It will either burst or choke me," he gasped. "If they stay long I shall certainly suffocate."

"Walk in, madame!" Cummings' voice reached them from the verandah. "Bring chairs forward, Sambo. I'm the engineer. Two ladies and a coloured preacher to see you, sir."

Clarence clenched one hand with a gesture of helpless indignation as he looked at Lyle, who said grimly, "Very sorry, but the part is forced upon you, and it may ruin our prospects unless you play it. Come, shake yourself together, for you will have to do the talking—I'm not altogether sorry I'm not a ladies' man. Oh, where has that black villain hidden my slippers?"

Markham's surprises were not at an end, for when, most reluctantly, he entered the covered verandah Florence Ellory rose with a shy smile from a chair, holding out her hand as she said, "We must apologise for troubling you, but I feel sure you will try to help us out of a difficulty."

"It is an unexpected pleasure," said Clarence, feeling horribly guilty as the girl's eyes rested on the borrowed uniform, which he hoped fitted him. "I will do whatever I can."

Meantime, keeping well in the shadow, Lyle slid towards a chair along the wall, making no sound in his stockinged feet, and looking considerably more like a trussed turkey than a Protectorate officer, while there was a broad grin on the face of Cummings, whose pocket bulged

suspiciously, and might have contained a bottle of Mulgrave's whisky.

"I bring you these ladies, sah. Mr. Rowlands send his compliments and say you do great favour by allow them travel up river to Warrimba under escort. Miss Ellory make your acquaintance before. The station officer—Mrs. Huntington. I leave them in your charge, sah," said the coloured gentleman with a graceful wave of his hand.

Clarence, too confused to point out the misapprehension, bowed.

Florence continued, "You can do us a great service. Mrs. Huntington is very anxious to rejoin her husband, the American missionary, who is dangerously ill, and the head of our Twin Creek station could find no other opportunity of sending me to join Mrs. Johnston at Warrimba. After many difficulties Captain Mulgrave said we might ask the officer in charge during his absence to see us safe part of the way. I never guessed it would be you!"

Clarence was wholly bewildered as, gnawing his moustache, he gazed at the tableau: Lyle standing bolt upright with, for sufficient reasons, his back against the wall, the black-robed girl, who seemed confident in his ability to help them, whispering to the haggard, anxious-eyed woman in brown calico dress who favoured him with a glance of fervent entreaty, and Cummings signalling to him in the background.

"I am afraid my husband is dying, sir," Mrs. Huntington said, with a trace of American accent. "You cannot refuse to help me. He sent a messenger down river, and when they cabled me at Lagos I came at once. The English missionaries' launches were away, and your Government people wouldn't, or couldn't, do anything. One even said he would not allow me to go at all."

"I fear they were right, madame," Clarence answered apologetically. "Some of the tribesmen have, it seems, established a blockade on these rivers, and I wonder if you know that the journey may be dangerous. May I explain that I am in no way connected with this post?"

"I only know that my husband lies, it may be, dying and alone among a savage people. You are a British officer, and you dare not, cannot, refuse me."

Clarence was on the point of saying, "I am only a gin trader," when he caught Lyle's eye fixed upon him in warning, and while he hesitated the lady continued breathlessly, "I tried several of the factories, but the agents were afraid of losing any men they sent with me. One of them, a man besotted with drink, was not even civil, and then Captain Mulgrave said it rested with you—and I know for the sake of those you have left at home you will help me."

Florence Ellory's cheek turned crimson at the mention of what happened at the factory, and turning towards her, Clarence, whose desire to help them clashed with his duty towards his father, asked, "Are you willing to run the risks too?"

"Yes," said the girl impetuously. "Otherwise it may be months before I can begin the work I am longing for, and I hope you will not refuse. I cheered Mrs. Huntington all the way by telling her how kind you had been to me."

"I must consult my colleagues," and when the others followed him to the further end of the verandah Markham said, "There is evidently to be no end to this wretched mistake. It may bring trouble upon us, but if I refuse that poor woman's face will haunt me, and, most reluctantly, I have made my mind up."

"So have I," said Lyle drily; "twenty minutes ago. We are bound to add further lustre to the reputation of the chivalrous officer, if only because I fancy some ruffian down river insulted that girl. I noticed she seemed to take your good will for granted, and from Mulgrave's survey drawings Warrimba Creek is on our way. You can go back and tell her your colleagues will do their best. What do you say, Engineer?"

Cummings laughed with an air of keen enjoyment. "Precisely! His colleagues will back him through thick and thin. It's not often a girl with a face like that begs favours from any man, and I'm going mouldy for want of innocent diversion. It's ten long months since I cleaned out the *Entreprenant's* engine-room with a fire-bar. But excuse me, Mr. Markham, you have got to go through in character. The missionaries don't love the traders, and won't have any turned loose up there."

Clarence returned almost shamefacedly. "We will start when you are ready," he said. "You must need refreshment after your journey, and I will tell our black cook to do the best he can on board the launch. We have nothing to do with the outpost, but we are going up river, and pass Warrimba Creek."

Mrs. Huntington insisted on wringing his hand, and dropped several tears upon it, but Clarence fidgeted under her thanks, and felt himself grow hot when Florence said, "I felt assured we could rely upon your kindness, Lieutenant Seaton."

Half-an-hour later the white-painted mission canoe was on its way to the coast, while the launch sped swiftly up stream across still reaches of moonlit water and through patches of blackest shadow. The two women sat in a cushioned corner of the cockpit under an awning Clarence stretched across it, Mrs. Huntington watching the forest roll past with returning hope in her sunken eyes, and Florence smiling at Clarence, who sat just clear of the whirring cranks, supporting a tray whereon were set forth cups of Markham's factory tea and the best examples of the Kroo cook's bakery.

He thought she was at least as pretty as Eveline, and in several ways more attractive, and perhaps at unguarded moments his eyes betrayed the interest he attempted to conceal, for once or twice Florence avoided them. What she thought was not apparent, but she also glanced at him, when he was not looking, and the young trader who had been a soldier set off the borrowed uniform. He was benevolently disposed towards all the world just then, for the helplessness of the fair traveller appealed to his pity, and at his years it was pleasant to pose as the protector of distressed beauty.

As it happened, Lyle's thoughts also turned towards Eveline. Not having yet discovered his slippers, he lay stretched along the counter with his feet tucked beneath him, and a hand, equally at home on the axe-haft, pack-horse bridle, or whale-boat's oar, gripping the iron tiller, while the black pilot who was going with them as far as Warrimba crouched close beside. It was for the sake of the North-country maiden he was willing to run any risk

on behalf of the women who had sought his protection. At no time would they have appealed to him in vain, but now, because of his devotion to one of the sex, it seemed especially incumbent upon him to render loyal service to all. Lyle had spent the years in which a man's character takes definite shape among a fearless and rudely chivalrous people in the clean, healing freshness of the Pacific Slope forests.

## IX

### FIRST BLOOD

THE time passed swiftly as mile by mile the launch increased the distance between her passengers and the Government outpost. Also, because in that region there are no gradations between civilisation and barbarity, once out of rifle shot of the stockade she steamed into a debatable land which had been the scene of many gruesome tragedies. There were few transverse creeks, and Markham possessed a copy of the outpost chart.

The furnace door was partly opened, and the stream of ruddy light that beat out from it showed Florence leaning against the shoulder of the elder lady, who had passed an arm about her. Cummings sat smoking forward of his engines, and Clarence, who filled the little oil cups now and then, leaned against the coaming somewhat sleepily. Lyle, not having found his shoes, was still stretched at full length upon the counter astern. Outside, and seen under the awning which fluttered in the draught the tiny steamer made, wisps of froth and a swift slide of moonlit water, whose oily surface glinted like molten silver, slipped past, while at times a heavy scent of lilies permeated the stale sourness of the stagnant atmosphere. All was still and peaceful, almost idyllic, and only the soft thudding of the circulater valves and whirr of the screw broke the silence.

Suddenly, however, a Krooboy forward commenced to chatter, something invisible moved among the wall of

foliage ashore, and Cummings, raising his head, asked sharply, "What's the matter now?"

"We have frightened some superstitious fisherman, I expect," said Clarence. "Interpreter, ask that fellow what he saw;" and the negro made answer, "Two men with gun lib for watch us in the bush."

"We're out of range already if they did," said Clarence. "I don't think you need trouble yourself, Mrs. Huntington," and there was silence for another five minutes, a somewhat anxious silence, for an instinctive perception of danger at hand seemed to descend upon the party.

Then a red flicker blazed out among the branches ahead, the crash of a flintlock gun rolled across the forests, repeated from trunk to trunk, and a voice cried in the coast palaver, "This be black man's river. No white man come up heah. Go back before we lib for cut you t'roat for you."

Clarence leapt up on the side deck, and stood staring into the blackness under the branches while another gun flashed, and something whirred noisily past his head. "Shut off the steam, Cummings," he said. "These must be some of the men who have risen against King Shotille. They've lashed an ugly-looking boom right across the river."

Cummings, stopping the engines, looked forward too, and saw canoe after canoe slide out from the shadows beyond the rippling line which marked the cottonwood trunk moored across their way. Then Clarence beckoned the interpreter. "Ask them how they dare stop us."

The negro shouted something unintelligible, and again an answer came back in English, "This be King Okambo's river, and no low white bushman lib for come up here without word from him. We want all them thing you got, then perhallups we let you go."

"Back her astern," said Lyle. "Cummings, with her curved forefoot, shouldn't she jump that boom if you drove her hard enough? Approve of that, Clarence? Well, if you'll take the tiller I'll serve out the matchets to those fellows forward."

Cummings patted the high-pressure cylinder with a grimy hand. "With these throbbing under a full head she

would jump anything so long as the bolts that hold the sections don't give out. Back her very slowly while I raise more steam."

Clarence turned towards the two women while the little craft slid slowly stern-first the way she had come. "Our saloon is crammed with stores, and I must ask you to sit low down on the flooring beneath the bunkers here. If we do not run the launch through it might be weeks before we could even get this far again, and I do not think there is any actual danger."

"We must face it if there is," said the American lady. "While my husband lies sick and helpless up there I can never turn back," and Florence, who sidled a little closer to her companion, added, "I am quite willing to go. We have every confidence in you."

"I must try to deserve it," answered Clarence with a tinge of bitterness. The confiding glance hurt him, for he felt himself an impostor, and it seemed hard that he must fight his first action under false colours. For a few minutes the men conferred in whispers, while the thud of many paddles filled the stagnant air; then a second line of craft stole out from beneath the overhanging foliage lower down the river, and Lyle said, "Trapped!"

Clarence, who went forward, explained the position to the Krooboys, concluding, "You have either got to smash any of the bushmen who crawl on board this steamer or lie down and let them chop big pieces out of you. But no bushman is going to chop me, and if you are fit to help there will be two bottles of green-case gin for every man when we get through. In the meantime live for lie down flat and their guns won't hurt you."

The interpreter evidently added some comments of his own, for there was an approving growl from the Krooboys, and Clarence, who returned, glancing at his white companions, added, "We must for several reasons avoid retaliation so far as we can, but none of those fellows must get a footing on the launch. We are bound to take precautions, Mrs. Huntington, but if you and Miss Ellory will keep low in the shelter of the iron there nothing could hurt you. This bundle of matting should make a comfortable seat."

The girl's hands trembled, but she answered bravely; the elder lady's thin lips moved, but Clarence, standing bolt upright at the helm, half-nervous, half-elated, lost what she said. At last, and in a very different manner from what he had once anticipated, he was going into action. He no longer remembered that he was a wholly unauthorised soldier now, and whether he won or lost the consequences might be serious. A jet of steam commenced to roar aloft from the crown of the blow-off pipe, then ceased, and the little craft trembled all through when Cummings, starting the engines full-speed ahead, observed, "Hold her square on the boom, and if she doesn't double up I'll shove her through or over it."

The whirr of the screw grew quicker. Faster and faster wreaths of creaming foam swept past, and the steel hull rattled in unison with the pounding engine stroke, while a roar of voices mingled with shrill whistles broke out, and the canoes closed on one another ahead. Some of the Krooboys forward answered the shouting, one or two stood up brandishing their matchets, but there was a growl from Lyle: "Lie down; I'll fling the first man overboard who gets up again. Clarence, she should go right through them if you hold her straight when she has jumped the boom."

Markham did not look at his passengers. His eyes were too busily occupied watching the craft ahead, but one of them glanced at him as he stood in the stern sheets erect and expectant, clenching both hands on the helm. He had cast off the clumsy sun helmet, whose low rim impeded his sight, and a red beam from the furnace smote full upon his intent face. It showed his inner character now, for Clarence's real education had been progressing rapidly, and those who knew Northop Markham would have recognised in him a son of the man who had by reckless daring and stubborn holding on won his way to fortune in heathen Africa. Theoretically, Florence Ellory abhorred physical violence, but she was human, and in spite of her terror the sight of the coolly determined man appealed to something hitherto latent in her nature. Her acquaintance with the other sex had mostly been confined to pale enthusiasts and dreamers of reform whose powers of eloquence perhaps atoned for an absence of bodily vigour.

"Starboard a little. Tiller away from you, Clarence," cried Lyle, who balanced a big hammer forward. "Interpreter, will you make those fellows lie flat down? We'll be into the thick of them in another two minutes. Hold fast, all."

Bending grim and grimy-faced over the engines, Cummings grasped a lever and patted the head of the nearest cylinder, as though it were an animate thing, caressingly; then Florence choked back a scream and Mrs. Huntington buried her fingers in her arm, for there came a heavy shock, and for a moment the bows of the launch rose high in the air as the curve of her forefoot struck the floating timber. There was also an exultant howl from the canoes, which was perhaps natural, for it must have appeared to their occupants that the vessel was going down stern-foremost. Then something rasped aft beneath her keel, and with a forward plunge she drove over the obstacle, hurling up a cloud of foam, while the shout of delight changed to yells of consternation and warning as with a trail of ruddy flame at her funnel she charged down upon the clumsy craft. No one on board afterwards remembered the exact sequence of events during the next few minutes. They happened so rapidly that they left but a fragmentary and blurred impression. Some of the canoes drew apart from each other, some closed in, and there was a great smashing of paddles and frail cottonwood as Clarence drove the steamer into the midst of them.

For a few moments several lay locked together across the bows, checking her way, and during that time it is probable the lives of all on board hung in the balance. The river men are used to warfare, and though preferring to lie in wait for their foe can on occasion make a stubborn stand, as the gunboats' bluejackets know. So black arms rose out of the water and grasped the rail. Woolly heads and naked shoulders appeared after them, and Lyle swung his long-hafted sledge double-handed, as he had been used to swing the axe. Cummings, with one hand on the lever, hurled heavy billets overboard with useful effect, and the Krooboys knew how to use their matchets. Here and there flintlock guns flashed ashore, and more than once stray pellets rang metallically upon the launch's plates,

while the balance of the charge probably embedded itself in the naked bodies of the marksman's comrades. Also, because Cummings had gorged the furnace, a column of steam poured out from the blow-off pipe, mingling its pulsations in the din.

Florence Ellory grew cold to the lips as she saw a herculean sable figure with rolling eyes and blue moles on its malevolent face leap in over the rail and whirl a gun-butt over the helmsman's head, but almost simultaneously a billet drove smashing into the centre of the dusky countenance, there was a splash in the foam alongside, and a hoarse voice near the engines said, "Got him. That's a third to me."

Then the mechanic flung his fire-door open wider and the flickering beam of radiance increased to a broad crimson glare, which revealed the mass of black limbs and faces just outside the rail. But meantime the engines were pounding under the last ounce pressure, and the steel stem of the launch crunched resistlessly through or over the unwieldy craft, which capsized before her, until at last she seemed to leap forward suddenly. Then Florence, raising her head, could see a confusion of overturned canoes, swimmers' heads, and wreckage sliding away down the bubbling wake astern. Already the cries that rose out of it grew fainter, there was a triumphant howl from the Kroomen, and then a heavy silence, through which Markham's voice broke hollowly—

"Get hold of the tiller, Cummings. Take the engine lamp, and come forward with me, Edward," it said.

Stepping on to the side deck, he moved unsteadily forward until, when hidden from the cockpit by the funnel and boiler end, he sat down on the dew-damped planking with suspicious suddenness. "It's rather hard luck, but I'm afraid some confounded nigger has disabled me my first time under fire," he said. "My arm feels as if it were cut half through, and somehow you'll have to tie it up. My head is swimming already."

Lyle, bending over him, started as he raised the lantern, for one side of the sand-coloured tunic was smeared with a darker colour, which pulsed through the clinging fabric in a regularly intermittent trickle. The Colonial had,

however, learned something of surgery in a land where the axe is in every man's hand, and generally leaves its mark on even the most skilful wielder.

"Slit the sleeve up, Cummings. It's the artery, sure," he said to the engineer, who had left the pilot at the helm. "Hold your arm up, Clarence, high above your head. Now, Cummings, roll that oil rag together solidly. Quick! can't you; this is a business that must be gone through smartly."

He was feeling for the main artery with his thumb, and had just pressed the pad upon it when the deck planks creaked behind him. He did not turn his head, for the red trickle was draining his comrade's life away, and the patient said shakily, "You had better be quick. I can't hold it up much longer—dizziness growing on me."

A hand touched the amateur surgeon's shoulder, the light of another lantern made his work plainer, and he could not check an impatient exclamation in time. Florence held the lantern, and Mrs. Huntington, stooping, surveyed what he was doing with approval. "You must both go back. This is no place for you," he said shortly.

"I guess you're wrong," was the answer. "It's our business to heal the black men's bodies as well as bid for their souls. You're fixing it neatly; go on in the meantime, and then I'll help you. Take hold of his hand, Florence, and keep his arm quite steady."

Florence shivered a little, which was natural. She had longed to heal the sick and suffering, which seemed the fittest task for gentle fingers—in theory. Its grim practical aspect was, however, different, and a sense of nausea came upon her as she saw the gap of raw flesh in the uncovered arm, which was white and hard above it, and stained with the crimson that dripped into the clotted rags below. So her face was whiter than the sufferer's as she gripped his fingers, while something seemed to cause her physical pain when he set his lips, and Lyle drew the bandage tight with all his strength. Then the elder lady asked for water, and when Cummings brought some Florence, conquering her repugnance, helped her at a disagreeable task, after which she caught at a funnel guy, trembling. She was nervous, emotional, enthusiastic,

but the events of the past hour had been trying to an inexperienced girl, and now the work was finished her relief was intense. Pity for the wounded man had also increased her difficulties instead of helping her.

"Thank you, Miss Ellory," the latter said somewhat faintly. "Must apologise for giving so much trouble, but you have made me much better," and Lyle's smile was answered by a flicker of amusement in the American lady's eyes.

"Aren't you forgetting the rest of the party, Clarence?" he said. "Now we'll help you into the cockpit until we get those cases out of the saloon, and you'll lie down quietly."

It was done, and Lyle seized the tiller just in time to prevent the sable pilot ramming the launch into the bank, while when they had settled the patient upon a locker Mrs. Huntington said, "You will have to learn nursing, Florence, because one has to grapple with sickness always in this part of Africa. So sit right there beside him, and let him rest his arm upon you. It must be kept high, in case the bleeding is too strong for the compression."

Clarence demurred, from a sense of pity, and not because the proposed assistance was of itself unpleasant, but Mrs. Huntington now spoke with the authority of one accustomed to rule, and Florence, deciding that if this was part of a missionary's work she must learn it, obeyed meekly. Once or twice young men had cast approving and somewhat sheepish glances upon her, but as she had been taught to look with suspicion upon such amusements as dancing the task afforded a distinctly new sensation. The handsome young soldier filled with physical courage and manly strength was a type she had seldom met before, and for a time she dare not look at him lest she should blush crimson. Her neck grew hot already as she felt the pressure of his wounded arm, and it is possibly well that, in spite of emancipated speech and opinions, there are still many of her countrywomen whose experience would have been similar.

"It is too bad, Miss Ellory, but one can't insist on the obedience of others and disobey himself. Still, you must not let me tire you," Clarence said, and then lapsed into an apparently contented silence. Meantime, Cummings had set his Krooboys to work clearing the tiny saloon, and

when his comrade seemed asleep at last he said, "Your quarters are ready, Mrs. Huntington, but I'm troubled about the—Lieutenant. He hardly looks fit for a journey."

"He is not. If the bleeding breaks out again his condition would be serious, and there is only one thing you can do. You have just got to leave him at Warrimba. Hilary Legh, who runs the station, is a good doctor, and I should say he'll fix him in a week or two. You can't trifle with a cut artery."

Mrs. Huntington withdrew after giving them a few instructions, taking Florence with her, and the girl stole a last glance at her patient before leaving. He lay still, propped against some matting, but when she laid the arm upon it his fingers tried to close upon her own and a voice said, "You have been very good to me."

Florence answered nothing, but her arm tingled, and again she felt startled as she hurried away. Then Lyle stood up in the cockpit, surveying himself ruefully, and presenting a sorry spectacle. The borrowed tunic had split right down the back, as well as in other places, and a splinter in a deck plank had rent one stocking from his unprotected foot, while only a thin singlet covered most of his muscular chest and neck.

"I'm a tolerably picturesque scarecrow to uphold the prestige of British arms," he said. "Still, there's one blessing—this unmitigated tunic's done. I was getting sick of sitting doubled up on the counter out of those women's sight. But, Cummings, we've got to settle what we're going to do with our chief. If we stop at Warrimba your late employer the Reverend Hilary will certainly recognise you. Hallo, wakening up—feel any better, old man?"

Clarence was certainly awake, for he answered, "I will not go to the station, or if I do will tell them exactly who I am. I was ashamed to accept assistance from that girl, and I simply can't abuse their hospitality under false pretences. Why will everybody insist on me being a Government servant—confound them!"

"You will simply have to," said Lyle. "I'm only a subordinate, but I'm going to see this business through. A dead or very sick man isn't much use to anybody, and you'll remember missionaries object to traders poaching

around their pet preserves—perhaps they are justified, because Hamburg gin by the gallon doesn't mix well with the Gospel. Taking that for granted, what will the mission people do? Send word to the Consular authorities we've broken the blockade taboo, and there's an end of our search for the mahogany."

"I'm thinking he's right," said Cummings, and while Clarence groaned Lyle continued, "I don't like it either, but from what you told me it hardly seems fair to your father and sisters to risk spoiling the whole thing to avoid allowing a missionary to render you surgical assistance without explaining your business. As to the girl, she's certainly interesting, and as certainly she'll find out who you are by and by, but by then I hope we'll have clinched our bargain with King Shotille; and as you will probably never see her again her opinion of you won't matter," he added drily.

"I'd give a great deal to get out of the abominable coil," said Clarence sullenly. "It is true my father's commercial honour and my sisters' bread depend on our success, and if it was necessary I would drag my own through the mud to secure it, but not to avoid losing a little blood."

"I wouldn't exaggerate. Try to look at it sensibly—there is no other escape out of the difficulty. I can't tie that artery, and—quite apart from commercial reasons—I'm not going to risk losing you, which would be the result if your circulation is too strong for us. One of us could go on, and languidly chatter with Shotille. I understand a haughty indifference to the value of time impresses these African potentates. However, I'm not going to excite you when it's a sound sleep you need."

"I will not go," said Clarence drowsily, and there was silence as the launch churned her way up the oily river. Several of her sable crew had received ugly knocks, a few had been scarred by matchets, but it is difficult to disable a Krooboy, and Lyle, who went round with arnica and balsam, decided that none of the hurts were serious. Their leader's were, however, and because the bandage slipped he was eventually carried ashore at Warrimba, blanched and half-unconscious from loss of blood, without sense or power to protest.

## X

### AT THE WARRIMBA STATION

A NUMBER of days had passed since Lyle left his comrade at Warrimba when, towards the close of one oppressive Sunday, Clarence helped to swell the number of worshippers in the little church. Missionary Legh's treatment had been successful, and now with his arm in a sling he leaned back watching Florence Ellory, who had assisted in his cure. She sat beside a little American organ, wearing the plain white dress her new companions had insisted on, and Clarence thought it became her.

Warrimba was a comparatively new station, though two fearless men had already been buried there, and its church an elementary structure of timber, rammed earth, and galvanised iron. The light outside was fading, and because the unglazed casements were narrow the building was filled with dim shadow; but turning his gaze across the few rows of woolly heads before him Clarence could see the tall figure of the preacher. Seen through the open door, the palm fronds hung motionless; the smell of the sun-baked compound drifted in to mingle with other characteristic savours, and, suffering from a sense of oppression, Clarence felt his skin grow prickly.

The discourse was in a mixture of native idioms, and he failed to understand a word, but each time the speaker moved the last of the sunset glow streaming in through a window touched his pale face and etherealised it, and Clarence was interested in watching its changes of expression. There was no doubt the Reverend Hilary Legh was in earnest, for Clarence recognised the ring of sincerity in his voice, and knew that it reached its mark by the low murmurs which rose from the impressionable audience. Then he lost himself in a reverie which would have been wholly pleasant but for the recollection of the fact that he had been received there under a misapprehension, and, still weak almost to helplessness, must depart on the morrow.

He remembered tossing in burning pain that never wholly left him, even when all other perceptions did, and awakening to find a pitying face bending over him while a little cool hand touched his forehead. Afterwards he lay languidly content for hours watching a white-robed figure which held cooling drinks to his lips at times, until it seemed to resolve itself into a vision of materialised mercy. Clarence was impressionable, and the African fever which usually follows any weakening shock is apt to warp the mind of any man in various directions. Its attacks are also sometimes very brief, and four days may see the sufferer rapidly recovering or at rest for ever. Then missionary Legh would come in with a book, and Florence read to him. He hardly remembered what she read, but thought it was poetry, for his mind dwelt most upon the cadence of the soothing voice, but the pleasant recollections vanished as he wondered what his gentle nurse would say when she learned he was—there was no other term for it—an impostor.

The discourse concluded, and the missionary's colleague, a little stout man who looked as if he was not above enjoying and even hankering after the good things of this world, replaced him. Hilary Legh was the spiritual force of Warrimba station, but Johnston was practical manager, and with his wife's assistance, or perhaps under her control, looked sharply after what might be called its business aspect. Markham wondered whether he had been sent there in order that his matter-of-fact inertia might balance the other's occasionally excessive energy.

Mrs. Johnston was an angular lady, sober-faced and prim, and her voice none of the sweetest as she led the singing, but Clarence had only admiration when Florence's contralto joined in. He also sang, but stopped abruptly, remembering he was rather to be numbered among the enemies, and regretted that at Legh's invitation he had crossed the threshold. It was darkening fast when the music which floated out through the narrow windows and across the steaming forest, devil-haunted and reddened by savage cruelty, ceased, and it seemed as if the powers of darkness had taken up the challenge. Even as Florence closed the little organ there was a stir among the sable

congregation, and from somewhere far off a deep vibratory rumble came trembling through the hot stillness. It rose again more loudly, rolling through the building in long pulsations, and in spite of Johnston's efforts the church was empty of all save the Europeans when it died away. Then for the last time it shook the forest as Legh pronounced the benediction.

Clarence knew this was the roar of the war drum, made to hurl defiance or warning across miles of swamp, for there was one in his father's collection of such curiosities, and he had wondered at its acoustic properties. He went out very shakily thankful for the faint freshness of the dew, and smiled at the precautions Johnston took to prevent the remnant of his flock from decamping. Most of the huts surrounding the station were empty, but Legh hardly ventured to blame their late occupants. Some were the lawful bondsmen of neighbouring chiefs, or at least owed tribute of oil and personal service, and they knew their lives would not be worth many hours' purchase should their late comrades find them at Warrimba instead of answering the call to arms. Therefore, as it is expressed in the coast palaver, they proceeded to "lib for them bush" with all possible celerity.

For a time Legh stood at his reading-desk with his face buried in his hands, then, raising his head, said softly, "How long—how long? Drunkenness, greed, and murder darkening all the land—Jardine dead of fever—the brilliant Maxley gone. Warrimba held a hundred souls under him—it has not two score now, and there may be none to-morrow. Is all that has been paid for it in blood and agony to be utterly thrown away?"

Great beads of perspiration dewed the high white forehead, for that was one of Legh's bad days, the days most white men in tropical Africa must face now and then, especially when, heartsick with many disappointments, they are wearing themselves out in a struggle to prepare the way for a brighter era which they at least will never see. What it costs those occupied in this task to cling fast to a belief in the ultimate good when oppressed by the loneliness of a land of death and cruelty they only know, and mind and body sometimes fail

under the effort. Hilary Legh strove to be an optimist, but at intervals the question—"Of what use is all this suffering and waste of life, when the tribesmen will not listen and the few most worth teaching turn towards Mecca instead of Jerusalem?"—demanded an answer.

Meantime, Florence and Markham sat under the oil-palms beside the river, where it was slightly cooler, watching the fireflies glisten among the dewy leaves, which for reasons that concerned both their bodily health and peace of mind was distinctly foolish. Clarence was, however, too weak to reach the dwelling without a rest. Close by, two rude wooden crosses still comparatively fresh from the hand of the hewer rose above tall white lilies, and one Markham had noticed earlier bore an inscription cut upon it by the man who slept beneath the other, "In hoc signo!"

This, from a severely practical aspect, appeared unwarranted, for the victory remained with the exponents of the Ju-Ju mystery who had instigated his slow poisoning. Clarence was not, however, considering such questions then. He reflected that it was pleasant to lounge there with such a companion, and the crosses suggested another thought, for he said, "How kind you have all been to me, and except for your care I might have been lying yonder now. But you will find out some day that I did not deserve it, and regret you ever received me at Warrimba."

"That is really absurd—a morbid fancy born of sickness," said Florence, who had grown proud of her first success at nursing. "Warrimba is open to anybody in need of help, and how could we refuse you of all people shelter after being wounded when protecting us? Some of the fever fancies are still clinging to you—for that would be the last thing the Reverend Hilary Legh would do. Don't you admire him already?"

Markham, for a reason not as yet quite apparent even to himself, felt inclined to answer, "Confound the Reverend Hilary," but said instead, "I think he is a very good fellow, but I want you to tell me, do you like this life?"

The girl hesitated, then answered thoughtfully, "How can I tell yet? It is what I longed for—and now it almost frightens me. Everything is so different from

what I expected; it is—one must say so—all so dark and brutal. Oppression and cruelty everywhere. But, at least, these wild men make war upon each other openly with gun and spear, and not by cheating and slander, as some civilised people do. I think I hate small trickery and pretence of all kinds more than anything—don't you?"

Markham did not answer. He felt miserably guilty, and tempted, at the risk of being hampered in his efforts on behalf of those at home, to make a frank confession. Still, it would not be fair to ask his nurse to keep a secret from her lawful superiors, and he dreaded the missionaries' interference. Florence had lost her reserve in his presence, and disregarding his silence continued, "A woman can after all do so little, and there is so much to do. What a task it would be for a man of eloquence and courage to denounce the infamous gin traffic, and limit the power of unscrupulous traders."

Markham was somewhat startled. "But there are two sides to every question," he said. "Much of the gin is merely used as currency, and you surely do not consider all the traders quite unscrupulous?"

Florence flushed a little, though the man could not see her face, as she answered, "I—I suppose that is too sweeping, but I have always been told so, and one or two I saw lately helped to confirm it. Can you deny, Lieutenant Seaton, that they have done incalculable mischief? Of course, as a soldier you——"

"I am not a soldier," and Markham was about to add, "Only one of those very traders," when Florence broke in, "It is a distinction without a difference. You certainly were an officer of the army until lately, were you not?"

"I was, but I resigned my commission," said Clarence shortly, and this was true; while the fact that most of the Protectorate officials who maintained justice with a strong hand were chosen from the troops explained the girl's speech. Circumstances had forced the title upon him with the uniform.

"It is an honourable profession. To serve one's nation, protect the weak, pull down the oppressor, and I think——"

Florence ceased, wondering whether she had said too

much, but Markham, who winced at every word, interposed, "What do you think?"

Then with a simplicity which led its possessor to venture where a practised flirt would hesitate, she answered, "I think that one could trust you to choose that which is best and maintain it in time of need."

"Please don't," and Markham drove one heel viciously into the mould. "Take the word of one who knows that a soldier is a very commonplace individual, and by no means a Crusader. If I am not presuming, may I say that you are a little extreme in your views, and that safety lies in choosing a fair medium. But I would like to ask a question. Did I talk any nonsense during the two nights I had fever badly? I believe some men do."

He waited impatiently for the answer, and Florence smiled. "It chiefly concerned some cantankerous adjutant, but you did talk a little about oil of the crowned horse brand, and rambled about forests worth ever so many pounds a tree. Of course, I couldn't understand it, and did not try to, but once when you were excited Mr. Legh came in."

Markham fidgeted until Florence continued, "He laughed as he told me that a sick man's secrets are inviolable, but not, as a rule, dangerous to anybody. 'For some reason, as in this instance, the sufferer's brain often works upon things which can have little real interest to him,' he said."

"He is a good man. And now, as I must go away to-morrow, and may not have an opportunity of speaking to you alone, I want to thank you——"

"Going away—so soon?" and Florence failed to hide the fact that it was unpleasant news. "We have not half completed your cure yet. You can scarcely walk."

"Still, I must go," said Markham gravely. "And I cannot go without saying that I shall always remember you as the good angel who took pity on me when I badly needed help. Time is precious, but I was almost sorry to recover so quickly. It is perhaps a liberty, but I want to ask a favour—if you ever should hear that your kindness was misplaced, will you try to defer judgment until you hear my side of the story when you see me again?"

"But that may never happen," and Florence's voice was not so indifferent as she wished it to be, while Clarence, who rose as she did, answered, "If I accomplish the work I have in hand it certainly will, and in the meantime I want your promise."

Florence hesitated, then said coldly, "Are you not suggesting impossibilities? Who could tell us any discreditable tales about you? Still, if they ever do I will try not to believe them. One must always humour a sick man's fancies," she added with a swift, mischievous smile.

They walked towards the house in silence, and Markham was afterwards both sorry and glad of what, acting under impulse, he did, for he said, "You will remember our compact, and people generally shake hands upon a bargain. It is to last until I see you again."

Florence smiled as she laid her hand in his, then snatched it away with a half-smothered ejaculation of anger and dismay, for the man bent his head suddenly, and when she gained the verandah her face was crimson and the touch of his lips still hot upon her fingers. During the last few weeks the human nature in her had begun to assert itself after years of self-repression. She had awakened to the knowledge that passion might not be wholly a weakness and a curse, and that there was more in life than discipline and monotonous labour. A few smiles on a sunburnt face and the touch of a sick man's hand had roused her to grapple with the discovery. Afterwards she, too, was glad to recall that kiss, but now it brought her shame and indignation against the offender, who, still weak in mind and body, had yielded to sudden temptation, and bitterly blamed himself.

Meantime Markham joined the two missionaries and Mrs. Johnston. He had noticed that the lady, who seldom handled any cases of sickness, regarded him with a kind of covert hostility. She rose when he came in, and Leigh said—

"I am sorry you cannot stay any longer with us, and consider you are running a dangerous risk in attempting a journey, but you alone know if your departure is actually necessary. We are always glad to welcome a fellow-countryman at Warrimba, especially if he needs help.

By the way, I notice Miss Ellory has mended your uniform tunic, and you can at any time resume it."

"You have been very kind, but it is absolutely necessary. I was delighted to get rid of the confounded tunic. You will excuse me, but I really meant it. Please understand that I am not an outpost officer, and merely borrowed the tunic. I told you so before."

Legh laughed pleasantly. "It is quite comprehensible. I have also felt that going about, so to speak, ticketed, has its disadvantages, and folks are apt to become unnatural at the sight of my uniform. Still, you are handicapped, because anybody could guess at your profession, even without official trappings."

"It's not always wise to judge from appearances; and being an inquisitive person, I want to challenge your statement. Would you welcome a gin-trader, for instance, at Warrimba?"

Now, though the stamp of the ascetic zealot always remained with Legh, he rarely paraded his office, and delighted to mingle as a man with his fellows. So he laughed again, answering frankly, "That is a home thrust. If the said trader was in distress, of course, I would—just as I would, unless his guilt was established, offer sanctuary to one of the terrible bush poisoners. The comparison sounds uncharitable, does it not? But I can't help feeling that too often there is not so very much difference between them, and what there is is in favour of the bushman. He generally, at least, strikes down his victims to honour his fetich gods, and the white poisoner to fill his own pockets. Am I sure he is a poisoner? Well, if you are dubious, experiment in the interest of science—it won't be any pleasure—with potato spirit at twopence-halfpenny per quart. But don't ask me to cure you after it."

"Do you know how many thousand gallons of Hamburg gin are poured into this afflicted country yearly?" asked the Reverend Johnston in his platform tone. "I will give you a pamphlet that will enlighten you, and can recommend its careful study, especially the statistics—I helped to collect them. I will get a copy."

"Please don't take the trouble," said Markham, who

was only restrained from departing by an obstinate disposition; but Legh had not done with the subject.

"My colleague is right," he said. "And I think the question is worthy of the Government's consideration. In fact, so serious does it appear, that if I heard of any attempt to open up trade in this district I should use every legitimate effort to prevent it. We were able to checkmate one agent since the veto. We are suffering so heavily that we could not recover from another blow."

"On account of the threatened rising?" and Legh answered, "Yes; I can only foresee trouble whichever way I look, but the political situation cannot be new to you."

"I shall be glad to hear your views," said Markham, almost too eagerly.

"Shotille is of course a tyrant, and has revived in a small measure the custom of human sacrifice, but I fancy it was only a sop to his priests, and he is a trader at heart. It is his rival Okambo I fear, for he is the last of a fetich dynasty, and will probably drive out Shotille, who has, however, brought his wrath upon himself. In any case, Warrimba may be plundered indiscriminately by either of the raiding parties, and if Okambo storms Shotille's stronghold it may be burned. Of course, we know the Administration cannot force a crisis, or, as no white man's commercial interests are involved, send up an armed force, which would certainly result in fighting. We accordingly expect them to adopt a policy of warning, protest—and *laissez-faire*—and can only take the risks as they come."

"But suppose you went down with the station, what good would that do the cause?" and Johnston interposed with evident approval, "That is a most sensible question."

"It is not for us to judge," and Legh's tone changed. "If we deserted this station we should never regain our hold on the bushmen or recover our influence. Two men have laid down their lives for its prosperity already, and I dare not accept the responsibility of flinging their labour to the winds."

"But the ladies? You cannot expose them to the risk of—what happened in the Sierra Leone back country, for instance;" and Legh sighed as he answered, "No. If

bloodshed appears imminent we shall send them to the coast, but these alarms occur so often without results that we must not be precipitate. Now, however, the outlook is black, and at times I grow despondent, though I know that is unwise. But our meal is ready."

Florence did not appear at table. The heat had been too much for her, she told Mrs. Johnston, and Markham, who felt as though each morsel would choke him, spent an uncomfortable half-hour listening while Mr. Johnston discoursed upon the enormities of the seaboard traders. Perhaps it was natural, but the speaker displayed a rancour against them at which his unwilling guest's face grew hot, until he was glad to escape to his own quarters and abuse the evil fortune which had brought him there. He played a most unwilling part, which had been forced upon him, and, once he made a treaty with Shotille, determined to return, promise that no gin should be vended thereabouts by his father's firm, and offer a humble apology.

He dreamt that Florence Ellory was looking at him with unutterable contempt when at last he fell asleep, and woke unrefreshed and irritable in the grey of the morning. An hour or two later a canoe with a negro in it paddled up the creek, and after thanking his hosts Markham gladly departed on board it to rejoin the launch. He did not know that Florence stood on the verandah watching him until the unstable craft vanished beneath the overhanging branches, and then sighed as she turned away, chiding herself for so doing, to prepare for the work of another burning day.

## XI

### IN THE DOMINIONS OF KING SHOTILLE

While Clarence Markham lay at Warrimba, Lyle and his party safely reached the stronghold of Headman Shotille, who had recently constituted himself monarch of

the surrounding country. Shotille was cunning rather than wise, or, although that district lay outside their practical jurisdiction, he would have invited the Government officers to a palaver, and, making promises which would certainly not have been kept, might have received official countenance. He had, however, succeeded too rapidly, and, vanity blinding his judgment, proceeded to deal with his weaker rivals in the arbitrary fashion usual with his kind. Nevertheless, being alive to the advantage of extending his trade, he received Lyle civilly, and invited the party to a state audience when Markham arrived. The forerunners spent the interval examining the mahogany forests, which warranted all Cummings had said, and opening private negotiations with Shotille through a confidential slave.

It was a hot morning when the trio were led into the potentate's presence in the sandy palaver square. Shotille sat under an ancient gig umbrella from whose ribs depended tassels of red curtain ropes, which was doubtless the gift of some enterprising factory agent. He was dressed plainly in white cotton, and his cunning eyes twinkled with good humour, for the redoubtable chieftain had lately absorbed a considerable proportion of a case of liqueur brought up in the launch. He was also well able to distinguish between trade gin and Chartreuse. Behind him stood his interpreter, fetich advisers, and a mixed assembly of splendid muscular heathen with knitted hair and raised devices in tattoo standing high above their sable skin. Some of them, only, wore loose robes of cotton.

Markham, with the instincts of his training, was chiefly occupied with the topography of the place—the broad space of trampled sand ringed about by pale green bananas, behind which rows of heavily-thatched huts fringed the forest. In front, a tall stockade commanded the sewer-like creek. Then, as his eyes grew dazzled by the glare of white sand and oily water, he listened drowsily while for nearly an hour a negro who had served on board a steamer set forth Shotille's greatness and generosity. At last he roused himself to attention when the orator, pointing to Cummings, observed, " King Shotille say that he very bad man. He got no dam conscience. Lib for

eat too much all day, saying he make us gin, then t'ief canoe and lib for get out down river. Shotille say he like them other white man bad, or he dun drown him."

Cummings stood forward, tilting back his sun helmet and clenching a big fist. "Ask him where's my wages for mending his rotten guns," he said. "It would take a good many niggers to drown me, and if any of them like to try it I'm quite ready."

He glared about him with the lust of battle in his eyes, but Lyle, who had heard of his exploits, drove a carved stool against the back of his knees, so that he sat down with violence, unintentionally. "Keep still, you lunatic," he said. "We're not prepared to endorse your challenge to the whole assembly."

The spectators laughed, and Shotille smiled benignly. The negro appreciates anything approaching a practical joke, and mingles burlesque freely with his tragedy. "Very bad man," he answered through his interpreter. "But we forgive him for two more bokus of them bottle."

"And some folks say the nigger is a simple-minded fool. We'll deduct those cases from your percentage," commented Clarence.

Shotille's next question—"What do the white men want?"—was unnecessary, for it had been explained in private already; but Markham, who had been posted by Heron, prepared to reply through his own interpreter, saying as he did so, "I believe they expect half-an-hour at least, and for the life of me I don't know what to say."

"Anyway you have got to say it," answered Lyle. "That's the privilege of being leader. Tell your black rascal to stir in the compliments, and if you run out of adjectives fall back on nursery rhymes. If you say them fast enough nobody will be any wiser, and I'll keep time."

For fifteen minutes Clarence, who had by no means wholly recovered, discoursed at random, the perspiration dripping from him meanwhile, and in what shape the interpreter, who evidently knew his business, transmitted his remarks the white men were not quite certain. They were, however, received with a becoming gravity, and when he concluded some jingling verses of the music-hall there was a murmur of approval, for the negro has a quick

ear for rhythm. But the orator glanced despairingly at Lyle as he said, "I can't go on much longer; throat's all stuck together, and my breath's giving out. In fact, I'm not fit to talk at all."

"I think you can come to business now," observed his comrade. "This is child's play. I've heard an Indian agent harangue the Vancouver Siwash for an hour on end, and all about nothing. They expected it, and he just did it."

"Then you can try it next time, and find out what it feels like when you're very shaky," said Clarence aside, and, after setting forth the objects of their visit as clearly as he could, concluded, "And now the only question to be settled is whether King Shotille will grant us his gracious permission to cut down the trees."

The headman's answer, as rendered into English, was prompt and business-like: "The white cappy is wrong. The question is, how much he will give the king?"

Markham offered a yearly subsidy, with a piece of cloth as royalty for every tree, and Shotille, answering, "That is nothing," immediately demanded ten times as much, and the whole of the first year's payment down. He added that he would take it in green-case gin.

The haggling promised to last for ever, and when subsidy and royalty had been fixed at last there was another difficulty, for Shotille asked, "How much of it will buy one of them devil (machine) gun fit for me to smash Okambo with?"

"None," was the decided answer. "It is against the law to sell such things, but he can have flintlock guns."

The monarch frowned, but after further discussion waived the point, then commenced to specify his favourite brands of gin; but again Markham stopped him. "We will pay in salt and cloth and sundries, but except as presents we will not bring up a single case of gin."

This threatened to bring the negotiations to an untimely close, and Cummings broke in, "You're not a missionary, and can't afford to be particular. If those fellows want gin they'll get it—there's plenty of it in West Africa, and condensed vitriol wouldn't hurt a nigger. Still, I can't say the cheaper brands are good for white men, because, when I couldn't get anything else, I've sampled them."

Markham did not answer, but the face of Florence Ellory rose up before him as Lyle said, "I don't want to urge you against your principles, Clarence, but this is a serious matter, and your father's people sell liquor."

"I'm not playing the part of an amateur philanthropist, but I must stand out for the salt and cloth," the head of the expedition said. "I can't help remembering that those good folks at Warrimba probably saved my life, and I'm not going to repay them by helping to introduce the thing they abominate. No; King Shotille must get his liquor wherever else he can."

"There the hand of the woman comes in," said Lyle aside, and he was right, for whatever else resulted from Florence Ellory's missionary efforts she at least assisted to prevent the flooding of Shotille's dominions with indifferent alcohol.

The headman at last yielded, for reasons which became evident afterwards, and a formal contract, written in English, and rendered into degenerate Arabic by one of the Moslem adventurers from the hinterland, whose scholarship and industrial skill are appreciated by the heathen rulers of the coast, was duly signed and sealed with a watch-chain signet Shotille had purchased from a factory agent. He was a pagan, and in many ways barbarous, but by no means a simpleton in commercial matters.

One other question he asked: "If Okambo the robber attacks this place, will the white men fight for me?" and Markham, ready to faint from weakness, answered boldly, "No; not unless Okambo threatens our own lives and property."

Shotille chuckled at this. "Then they will have to fight, for if Okambo comes here he certainly will. He is a very bad man, and different from me. I love the white men so much that I have given them my forests almost for nothing."

A state feast in a rammed-earth building followed, and Cummings, who expressed profound contempt for the viands, helped himself liberally to huge draughts of tumbo wine. "Found any finger-bones yet? It's considerably worse than Egypt, and they fed us on some quaint things there," he said. "Did I ever tell you I was in Egypt?"

"No," said Lyle. "You seem to have been in a good many places. The question is, rather, why you left it."

"That's my business," Cummings answered serenely. "Well, I was there, teaching a fellaheen blacksmith thicker-headed than a nigger how to run a new irrigation pump. Pump was made in England; I went out with it. My chief was a Frenchman, and if he hadn't had a nasty temper we wouldn't have parted. Now you'll mind that a Frenchman has his bad qualities as well as some good ones."

"In which he resembles most marine engineers. I've met a good many French in Canada, and you can keep to the point," interposed Lyle.

"A big Pacha came along, and we had dinner on his dahabaieh. They laid down a kind of little table tray scarcely two feet high, and we squatted around it, sampling curiosities, until the Frenchman lit on to something very quaint, with a big bone in it. He didn't quite know how to tackle the thing, so I kept on talking fast in French and winking, until, when the Pacha wasn't looking, he slid that bone right under the table. That was good so far as it went, but presently two black men came in and took the tray away, and there was the Frenchman growling *sacrés* and looking at the bone. Never knew I could speak French, did you?"

"I'm not convinced of it yet," said Lyle.

When the feast was ended the launch started up river, towing a flotilla of canoes loaded with Shotille's retainers astern, while that worthy sat with a liqueur bottle beside him in the cockpit. The assembly disembarked near the mahogany trees, and Lyle, who by right of his experience in the forests of the West was to superintend the felling, said, "It would be advisable to impress these folks with the white man's superiority, and with your consent we'll proceed to do it. Ask the headman, interpreter, how long it would take his people to hew down a tree."

"Two day, if they not get tired and dun go to sleep, sah," was the answer. "He send four men to show you how fit they be."

Four matchets rattled feebly upon the bark of a forest giant, and Lyle, after methodically stripping himself to

his gauzy singlet, carried from the launch a seven-foot cross-cut saw and one of the beautifully modelled axes our Colonists buy from America because Sheffield grinders cling to ancient patterns. "You will take a spell with me, Cummings, for the credit of our colour," he explained.

"There's only one thing can uphold that properly—the high-pressure cylinder," answered the mechanic. "I'm not a steam engine, and if there's a relic of barbarity it's manual labour. However—if I break my back I'll keep time with you."

For a space, after an opening had been hewn, the two figures swayed at either end of the saw, and there were exclamations of wonder as the black men noted how the keen teeth crunched through the timber. Then Lyle stood up, and, poising himself lightly, twice hove aloft the wedge of glistening steel. If there is one task which more than another develops any man's firmness of shoulder and slenderness of flank it is the use of the axe as practised in the Canadian Dominion, and the double-edged blade was of much the same pattern as those with which the early English hewed through Norman mail.

Markham envied his comrade as he stood, unscathed as yet by the climate, an incarnation of strength and energy, gripping the long haft. Then the blade made lightnings in the sun-glare, and, at first by twos and threes, then in one continuous shower, the chips whirled up. It was a heavy weapon, needing as much skill to handle as a fencer's foil, but it flashed and circled lightly past head and side and knee until the bush was filled with its hammering. At last, when the sweat dripped from him, there was a groan of parting fibre, and Lyle stepped back, while the forest trembled as the great trunk smote the earth with a thunderous crash.

"So far, so good," he said. "Cummings, I might teach you to use the saw in a year or two. Now for the second experiment. Bring me one of the largest augers. When one has the dollars, this is the favourite Western practice."

He bored two holes low down in a trunk, rammed cylinders of giant powder into them, adjusted fulminator and fuse, and drove the spectators to a safe distance. The fuse sputtered, then a tongue of yellow flame shot

up, there was a sharp snapping rather than an explosion, and rising, as if hove up by supernatural agency, the tree, plunging forward, came down heavily. "I'm only the practical man," said Lyle, resuming his garments. "Clarence, might I suggest that you get up and point the moral."

Markham did so, and when the cries of astonishment died away his speech, translated by the interpreter, was received in dead silence: "We are peaceable men, and only want to cut down the trees we have bought unmolested," it concluded. "But if any bad men should feel tempted to rob us—you have seen what we can do."

Leaving the men Markham had covenanted to pay behind, the spectators withdrew duly impressed, and, tired of the cramped quarters on board the launch, the three Europeans sat together in their tent when night closed down. The bush was black and still and solemn, for the beasts had not awakened yet, but myriads of winged creatures which bit, attracted by the light, prevented any of the party enjoying their well-earned rest.

"We have made a good beginning," said Clarence. "In fact, so far we have succeeded almost too easily. From my father's stories I know this is a country of surprises, where one can never be sure of anything but fever and the constant risk of death. But we have got the concession, and I mean to keep it even if we have to fight for it, which is not impossible. In the meantime, because to be fore-warned is to be fore-armed, these are a few of the things we shall have to contend against. First, the fetich priests' plotting; second, mutiny; then fever among ourselves and epidemics among the blacks, treachery on the part of Shotille, attempts by our white rivals to induce him to renounce his contract, and, I might have put it first, the hostility of King Okambo. It is not altogether an attractive programme."

Clarence had no commercial training, but he had learned many useful things in the service, including the value of a firm grasp of details and a quick decision. He also recognised his double responsibility, and, as he sat there wrinkling his forehead, felt the shadow of the tropical forest already closing about him.

"You are probably right," said Lyle. "Still, hitherto, with one small exception, the whole journey has been rather a series of picnics than the wading knee-deep through horrors I had expected. It is positively a peaceful country on the face of it!"

"I only know it by repute, but above all it is a treacherous country, that takes strong men in and casts them out worn down to skeletons or crazy lunatics. I have a wholesome fear of it, and so will you before it has done with you."

Cummings was busy boring out his pipe, and Lyle, who sat in the tent door, did not answer. He had lived alone at times in the coniferous forests of the Pacific Slope, but there the wanderer would only meet a few harmless Siwash or an odd grizzly bear, and he commenced to realise that the African bush was different. Sickness and germs of madness lurked in every breath of its tainted atmosphere, and as he looked out upon the dim wall of foliage hemming in the little camp he could credit the statement that no white man who entered its shadowy portals came out unchanged. It was a region of mystery, whose real loneliness and horror have not yet been fully told, and he felt, as others had done before him, a vague fear of the unknown. A glance showed him the last of the red cooking fires slowly fading, and a deeper gloom closing in about the rude branch shelters their sable assistants had erected, and turning abruptly he drew the flap across the opening.

"You may be right. I feel an unpleasant creepiness I never experienced before, but there's no use encouraging it," he said. "Clarence, we'll get out the cards."

For a time they gathered round a provision case, but, conscious that they had begun another game that day which must be played out in deadly earnest, each showed scanty interest in the cards, while when at last Lyle had recklessly sacrificed an ace Cummings stood upright saying, "What was that?"

There was a rustling in the undergrowth, and when Clarence flung back the tent flap they made out by hearing rather than sight that some of their assistants were in hurried flight. A few cries were answered by a clamour

in the camp, half-seen figures appeared among the trees, and then Cummings gripped Markham's arm, for a low sputtering sound commenced behind the illuminated canvas. "By George, it's a fuse!" he cried.

Lyle plunged between the two men, upsetting Markham as he passed, and stooped over the faint red sparkle in the grass, then whirled something that fizzed aloft and flung it from him. It fell softly among the dew-drenched leaves, from which a pale flame presently shot up and showed the terrified negroes, who remembered what befell the tree, the white man standing unmoved with his arms folded before the tent. The flame sank down, and a hum of wonder rose out of the thick darkness which succeeded it.

"Those niggers learn quickly," said Lyle. "It was a stick of giant powder, and had it been any other kind would certainly have translated us, as it was meant to do. The black man, however, overlooked the fact that these high explosives require a detonator. Without it they simply burn, and before I held it up I saw the detonator wasn't there. Get out the magazine, Cummings."

The speaker's voice was not quite in keeping with his attitude, and Cummings' hard fingers fumbled some seconds over the padlock of the iron box before he discovered its hasp was open.

"I locked it immediately I took the other sticks out," said Lyle with a puzzled air. "What on earth could anybody want to blow us up for? Well, we'll go down and make it interesting for the headman to-morrow, though when I saw the thing was harmless, remembering some of our Indian agents' tricks, it struck me it might be judicious to pose as Ajax."

"Are you quite sure you locked it?" asked Clarence; and Cummings broke in, "I saw him do it."

Markham appeared to think hard a few moments before he said, "So far as I can see this is some of the Ju-Ju priests' devilry. Shotille is inclined to be an agnostic, and it wouldn't suit their book for us to bring common sense and some enlightenment into his dominions. My advice is that we say nothing. In the first place, we don't want to admit that we are not perfectly capable of protecting ourselves, and in the second, thanks to your

quick wit, these fellows will spread the story that we are invulnerable. I devoutly wish we were, for I foresee the possibility of similar attempts. Lyle, I must congratulate you."

Cummings nodded. "The chief is, as usual, right. We don't beg any nigger to take care of us. No; I'm thinking it's better to keep both eyes open and just lie low until the man who tried it gives himself away. Then," and the speaker glared into the darkness, "that man will be mighty sorry for himself."

It was so decided, and before half-an-hour had passed silence once more reigned unbroken over camp and tent, though while his comrades tried to sleep Lyle sat in the entrance to the former with a repeating rifle laid across his knees. He also wondered whether he would leave his bones in that forest instead of returning triumphant to lay what he had won there at the feet of Eveline.

## XII

### LIEUTENANT LAWRENCE SEYMOUR

When morning came at last the trio, who had not enjoyed their first night in what they christened Mahogany Camp, were, in spite of the lassitude which usually attacks the white man on first awakening in that climate, glad to set to work. Day by day they extended the clearing and rolled more huge logs down to the river, but the story of how they struggled against native slothfulness and stupidity, quelled incipient mutinies, grew sick and despondent under stress of temperature and recovered hope again, would take long to tell. Clarence was also twice on the point of starting for Warrimba when circumstances rendered his journey impossible; then it again became necessary for him to hold his peace. Meantime, while rumours reached the camp that King Okambo was meditating mischief, other men and events were conspiring against them.

One lowering evening Lieutenant Lawrence Seymour, who was new to the country and its conditions, sat in a frail canoe which a brawny savage attired in a crownless silk hat and brilliant tennis-jacket propelled leisurely up stream. The Government steamers were busy, and, being of no particular value to the State just then, Seymour was left to make his own way to the scene of his duties in the mail canoe. He wore a brand-new sand-coloured tunic with silver buttons, which had suffered from being slept in during two nights on board a craft that leaked more than usually freely, and the lieutenant's temper had suffered too.

For the last hour he had been endeavouring with small success to keep his baggage clear of the water, and growled disgustedly when, as the negro reached out to seize a barrel under the fading light, the fluid, settling towards the depressed side of the canoe, soaked him through. The keg was painted vermilion, with large yellow letters on its lid. It had also a flag attached to it, and formed a portable post office of a type not then uncommon thereabouts. It could be left on moorings for the next mail carrier or transported in a canoe, preserving its contents in case of capsize, the only drawback being that some bushman, attracted by its gaudy colouring, occasionally confiscated the whole.

It was now the black postman's duty to convey it up river, but the keg was heavy and the canoe small, so when, grumbling at his slothfulness, Seymour endeavoured to assist him, the unstable vessel turned over. Seymour could swim, but he had heard there were hungry crocodiles in those waters, so he grasped the cask, which, being freed from its moorings, rolled round and round, sliding him back into the river each time he endeavoured to climb out upon it. Meantime, the negro, who swam after the overturned canoe, hailed him to render assistance in righting it, and when with some difficulty this had been effected fell cleverly head-foremost into it. Seymour essayed to do the same, but to board an unstable canoe in that fashion requires much practice and considerable agility, so next moment he and the postman were back in the water again, with the overturned vessel above them.

The soldier came up spluttering, breathless, and savage, the negro with a broad grin, observing, "You one of them fool white men who savvy nothing."

This was the last straw, and Seymour grabbed at the amphibious heathen, who promptly went down head-foremost, then rose a dozen yards away still grinning. His baggage and papers, besides several official documents marked "Important," lay somewhere at the bottom of the river, and after struggling out of his soaked tunic, which hampered him, he clung with one hand to the treacherous craft it was apparently impossible for him to get into, in the centre of a lake-like reach, with night closing in. All round the dismal mangroves rose out of many feet of slime which would have smothered any European who ventured among it, and his companion, who eyed him suspiciously, was treading water at a safe distance.

"Come back at once and turn this confounded thing the right side up," cried Seymour furiously.

"Soffly, soffly man catch monkey! What you lib for dash me?" inquired the negro; and Seymour, who was a hot-headed young man, answered, "A thrashing if you're not quick. I'll teach you to play tricks with me."

"Then I lib for bush," said the mail carrier. "And you lib for them barrel."

He swam a few fathoms further, chuckling over what appeared to be an excellent joke, until a hail from the European, who realised that this would certainly result in his drowning, arrested him, "Come back, and I'll dash you anything you want in reason."

"One bokus red gin, and ten big leaf tobacco," said the heathen. "You dun dash me them thing, you swear?" and when Seymour solemnly pledged himself returned, and not only succeeded in turning the craft over much more readily, but dragged his companion into it with no great effort. The keg was captured too, and it was midnight when, wet through and in an evil humour, the officer reached the outpost he was journeying to. It was dark and silent, but when, blundering among sharp-spined pineapple leaves, he strode towards it, a negro in uniform barred his way with a rifle barrel, and at first

stubbornly refused to let him pass. When this difficulty had been got over he spent ten minutes pounding on the door before a half-dressed negro holding a paraffin lamp opened it, and stared at the bedraggled apparition outside.

"I'm Lieutenant Seymour," the latter explained. "I suppose Captain Mulgrave has not returned, but as I have lost my outfit I want you to find some of his dry things for me and get me some food immediately."

"You not Cappy Seegry," was the prompt answer. "Cappy Seegry dun gone away already. You some low, drunk trader man," and the door closed with a bang.

Seymour pounded on it savagely. "Turn out your guard there, Sergeant, and break this door in," he shouted, but a voice rose from the compound, "Cappy Mulgrave dun take them guard away two day befolloh to-morrow. Only offisah man give me ordah, sah."

Seymour thereupon induced the mail carrier to smash in the green window lattices with his paddle, and when the steward appeared again informed him that unless he were admitted he would continue operations until there was a hole in the casement large enough to crawl through, after which the negro opened the door. Seymour strode in, demanding food and dry clothes at once; but the steward, who, ushering him into a room, produced a few biscuits and lukewarm mineral waters, said, "I not dun give Cappy Mulgrave's clothes to any one. Cappy he come back himselluf to-morrow."

"I am an officer," protested the unfortunate visitor, and then grew uncomfortable as the negro inspected him critically, after which with an incredulous grin he banged the door again and withdrew.

Seymour proceeded to munch the biscuits and quench his thirst with the partly evaporated beverage, but he was not even suffered to enjoy this in peace, for a black face looked in at the broken window, and a mournful voice said, "I want my gin bokus, sah."

"I forgot. Confound it! Look here, Sambo. I really don't know where to get the wretched stuff from. Will several shillings content you?" said the harassed officer.

He held out sundry silver coins, but even to-day minted

money is looked upon with suspicion in a region where barter rules supreme, and the mail carrier repeated, "I want my gin bokus, sah."

Then Seymour was seized by an inspiration. Pen and ink lay upon the table, and, having met agent Heron, he scribbled an order on his factory and gave it to the claimant, saying, "Take this book to Cappy Heron when you go back, and you'll get your gin case, savvy?"

"How I go look Cappy Heron?" and answering, "Any way you like, but get out and go to perdition before you drive me crazy," Seymour closed the shutters. "This is a charming country to ship any unfortunate subaltern to. Here am I locked in with a few damp biscuits to eat and nothing but a cane chair to sleep on. I wonder if it's the usual African hospitality?" he added, as he turned the lamp out and flung himself, indignant and still soaked, upon the lounge.

He was worn out, but could not sleep, for an unlovely voice from the compound broke through the buzz of many mosquitoes and jarred upon his ears. "I want my gin bokus. Dam low t'ief man!" it wailed, until at last there was a scuffle and a splash, and, trusting the Yoruba sentry had pitched his persecutor into the river, Seymour lapsed into restless slumber. He was awakened early next morning by a sound of voices, and opening the lattices saw a little launch with soot-blackened funnel alongside the landing. A few black soldiers stood on board her, and next minute a hollow-cheeked white man, whose eyes were heavy from want of sleep, wearing a uniform beaded with the night damp, entered the room.

"Good morning! I am the officer in charge of this station," he said. "In return for the confidence, may I ask whom I have the pleasure of entertaining?"

"The less said about the entertainment the better!" was the younger man's answer. "I have the apparent misfortune of being sent up to this station, too. Lawrence Seymour is my name: and it would be a charity if you could lend me a suit of dry clothing."

Captain Mulgrave looked as puzzled as he really was. "Seymour called here, and was good enough to abscond with several suits of my uniform before. From my

steward's description he was not in the least like you. I presume you can establish your identity? It's a necessary question, as there is evidently more than one of you, and if any more turn up I shall have to order a new outfit."

Seymour stared at him, wondering if the speaker had lost his sanity, before he answered with uncontrollable indignation, "I was warned against entering this service, but the reality far exceeds anything my advisers depicted. A half-naked savage upset me out of the canoe, lost my baggage, and some of your despatches, too—they were marked 'Important'; then coolly demanded a case of gin for fishing me out again. I arrived here hungry, half-drowned, and thirsty, and had to break a window to get in, after which your major-domo locked the door, presumably lest I should get up in the night and steal something. Now, as a climax, you insinuate I am an impostor. I shall be glad to accompany you down river and ask the Consul to vouch for me."

Mulgrave laughed outright, for the other's wrath was too real to be assumed. "In addition to all that, you will get fever if you excite yourself," he said. "Still, I was certainly honoured by the visit of another Seymour, who also borrowed my clothing, some little time ago, but I'll take you on trust until I fathom the mystery, and even divide the remnant of my wardrobe with you. As to the despatches, they usually are marked 'Important,' even when it's a solemn inquiry why we used two quarts of oil more than we did in the previous financial year. You'll find a tub outfit yonder, and breakfast will be ready almost as soon as you are."

Seymour, arrayed in borrowed garments, did full justice to the meal, and when they discussed it together his host said meditatively, "Presuming you are the genuine article, I'm puzzled as to who the other fellow could be. As to his reason for the journey I have my suspicions, and they point to some attempt to smuggle modern arms into the disaffected country, though why in that case he should have fought an apparently plucky action with a party of King Okambo's men, instead of being granted a free passage, puzzles me."

"Running modern arms is a serious offence under

international treaty?" said Seymour, and Mulgrave nodded. "It is. I picked up a bushman whose head had been laid open with a hammer, and he told me the fellow, who never burned a cartridge, hurled his craft through the thick of them. I fancied it was you, and Jordan had sent you some warning to deliver Okambo. The worst is that as we are forbidden to provoke hostilities in the meantime we can't well go up stream in search of him. However, sooner or later we will bring him to a reckoning."

Mulgrave was a keen officer of long experience, and unknown to them another trouble was being prepared for the mahogany cutters, while about the time when the genuine Lieutenant Seymour commenced his duties Florence Ellory lay in a darkened room at Warrimba suffering from a climatic headache and a fit of black depression, also climatic. Most of her fellow-teachers suffered every now and then in the same way.

Warrimba was almost deserted; the few adherents who still remained were either old and helpless or outcasts from the river tribes, who are not particular, of disreputable character, and almost supernatural stupidity. The young, intelligent, and strong had either returned to their former rulers or departed for the seaboard to make sure of their lives, with Legh's full concurrence. Florence found it nearly impossible to master the rudiments of their language, and some of the listeners, who could speak it, wilfully misunderstood her English or mocked her poor attempts at the native idiom, while she realised that her strength was yielding under the temperature. Mrs. Johnston, who glanced into the room, stepped forward and laid her hand with a cold kindness on the girl's bent head. She was not a particularly sympathetic woman generally, and painfully direct in speech.

"You must not give way to morbid thoughts, my dear," she said. "It is certainly trying weather, but it cannot last for ever. There, try to shake them off. It might perhaps help you to tell me what is troubling you."

"It is not the weather," and Florence tried to hide her reddened eyes. "I feel that I can do so little, and before I came out I hoped to do so much. It seemed such a

great work to help these helpless people, and now they won't even listen. How can you teach people who will not understand you? I might have stayed at home and aided my poor sisters to struggle for a living—I had pupils, and they said I was a good teacher. All afternoon I tried to write them a cheerful letter—they need cheering—but the cheerful words won't come. This lonely savage country disheartens one."

Mrs. Johnston, recalling her own experiences, said gently, "You are foolishly troubling yourself about matters that don't concern you. Go on doing your best, and the results will come in a way you hardly look for some day, while before many months are over you will see the black folk crowd back to Warrimba once more. Now, tell me frankly, are you fretting because you miss anybody at home besides your sisters?"

Florence looked up as though puzzled, then blushed as she answered with a trace of indignation, "No!"

"I am very glad," said Mrs. Johnston. "I also wondered whether the young officer who stayed here had said anything which helped to unsettle you. He came out in the same steamer with you. Take my advice, my dear, and forget it if he did. There are men who consider it a becoming pastime to pour nonsense into the ears of an inexperienced girl and then make a jest of her, while, even if that were not so, having once devoted yourself to the cause, you dare not turn back. What shall our small joys and sorrows count against the progress of the great work in the end? and, even if one must crush down all natural affections, discipline is wholesome."

Florence had thought the same, under the influence of a handsome preacher's eloquence and choral music, when her prospective task was glorified by roseate mists of romance. Now the romance had vanished, the grim reality alone remained, and her nature rose in temporary rebellion against something in the other's cold austerity. "I cannot believe we were given kindly affections for the mere purpose of stifling them," she said.

"Nor I, provided they do not blind us to the dictates of duty and reason; and it is your duty to sacrifice everything that may hamper you in the task you have

voluntarily chosen. No half-hearted person can succeed in it. But I believe a good man can more than double his usefulness when aided by a good woman, and—under limitations—our teachers are not forbidden to marry."

She went out, leaving Florence more troubled than before. She still considered her calling a high one, but the memory of the young soldier haunted her, and already she wondered guiltily whether some day she might not have to choose between love and duty. Mrs. Johnston found her husband, who did not believe in unnecessarily mortifying the flesh, dozing in a canvas lounge on the verandah, with a jug of green-lime water by his side, and rousing him to attention said, "Did it ever strike you, Peter, that it would be a good thing if Florence married Hilary?"

"No," said the Reverend Peter. "Why should it be?" and his spouse answered, "He would make a model husband, and unless he marries I fear he will press on inland when peace is restored. If he stays here Warrimba will become a great station by and by, but you know the one man between Lagos and the Cameroons who can help its full development is Hilary."

"I know his enthusiastic notions would have wrecked the place already without me;" and the lady smiled coldly as she answered, "You must not be jealous. I have set my heart on a great future for Warrimba, and with that in view we must secure Hilary. Now I know he has long been dreaming of going north to meet the Moslem mallah in the debatable territory, but I notice he has been growing interested in Florence, and if he married he could make no more mad ventures, but would perforce settle down quietly."

"Very well. If you have decided upon it you will no doubt get your own way—you generally do," said Johnston sleepily, and, turning over, lapsed into slumber.

It happened a few days later, when Johnston and Legh had descended a creek in search of intelligence as to Okambo's movements, that a white man called Smithers stopped his steam launch at Warrimba. He walked with a stoop, due perhaps to rheumatic fever, his claw-like fingers twitched nervously, and his bloodshot eyes were

sunk deep in a blotched face. He had steamed down a winding creek which led past the American mission station presided over by Huntington, who, because that society's posts were many and funds inelastic, was allowed to supplement its revenues by trading on opportunity. Mrs. Johnston received him coldly, but grew thoughtful when he asked—

"Can you tell me, madame, whether three white men in a steam launch passed up this way, and if so where they were making for?"

"If you have just come from Kalala I cannot see why you should ask me. They brought Mrs. Huntington up river with them."

Smithers did not feel called upon to explain that he had utterly failed to extract any information about the visitors from that grateful lady. So he answered, "She really didn't know where they went to, and there is a reason why I am anxious to find out."

"I cannot help you. Their movements do not in the least concern me;" and Smithers broke in, "I think you are wrong. Not one of them were Government officers, anyway, and you have been harbouring impostors. They were rifle or gin smugglers in disguise."

Now Mrs. Johnston shared her husband's prejudice against all traders, and the specimen who leered upon her with a grin of triumph was neither a representative nor an attractive one. Nevertheless, she was curious, and, making an effort, stooped to say, "If that is true—and I am doubtful—do you know exactly who they are?"

"No," said Smithers, "I'm trying to discover;" and the lady answering, "Neither do I, and I do not purpose to help you," cut short the interview.

Smithers steamed down river, swearing softly at the mistress of Warrimba. "Those fellows are after something good, and if there is anything worth finding up these creeks it belongs to the Amalgamation, and should help to pile up my commission," he said. "Sooner or later I'm going to find what it is, but there's no use getting myself shot prematurely. I must ask Okambo for a protecting Ju-Ju."

Meantime, Mrs. Johnston, who watched the launch

grow smaller, pondered on what she had heard, and determined for the present to keep it a secret. She was a calculating woman, ambitious for the future of the station, and decided she might use the knowledge to further a half-formed scheme she had been considering. Neither had she the respect for her husband's judgment that outside parties had.

## XIII

### THE JU-JU SACRIFICE

The sable timber cutters worked for their white employers at Mahogany Camp as negroes judiciously handled usually do, that is to say by no means very industriously, but for the most part with good-humoured resignation when they could not avoid their task-master's eye or deceive him by ingenious excuses. There were, however, occasional attempts at mutiny, and the white men seldom slept soundly. Clarence had learned to correct a subordinate's blunders without loss of temper, Lyle was a patient man, and if the pair found it difficult to restrain Cummings' wrathful ebullitions it was the latter who helped them to overcome a certain serious difficulty.

The African suffers from various ailments whose symptoms are visibly distressing even if some are not enumerated in any work of medical science, but he is also apt to sicken without any symptoms at all, particularly when there is special need for muscular effort. So one day Clarence said, "Five more of them down this morning, and, though they were chattering like monkeys a few minutes before, their groans were awe-inspiring when they saw me. I can't make sick men roll mahogany trunks in this sun, even if I suspect they're malingering, and I suppose we must spare them, at the risk of the epidemic spreading. Their ostensible complaint will hardly bear translation."

"There is a good deal you don't know—you haven't

been to sea," Cummings observed with a chuckle. "Now, I've been turned out of five steamers because I knew too much, and whatever the complaint is the treatment's simple. When our coloured men went down in the forecastle the mate goes in with a bottle. 'Half a pint of this mixture, sonny, every hour until you're better,' he says, and after two doses the black man got well in a hurry. If he didn't we doctored him according to the medicine chest manual, which is generally fatal. Let me have free run of the drugs, and if they're not fit to-morrow you can cure or kill them in orthodox fashion."

Clarence assented dubiously, but after Cummings had gone round with a tin funnel and big calabash filled with his prescription the results were surprising. The engineer was not, however, satisfied, for when the patients professed themselves completely cured he made their comrades hold them down while he drenched them through the funnel. "I be fit wolluck for ever, sah," one protested, but Cummings, thrusting back his sun helmet, shook his head gravely before answering, "I'm going to knock them sick thing right out of you, you ungrateful heathen, and you'll let me know if you feel him coming back again."

It was done, and when the spluttering victims skulked away Clarence, who was half amused and half angry, commented, "You're a man of many talents, Cummings, and that stuff must have been particularly abominable, for it's generally believed one negro can take as much physic as three white men."

Cummings seemed destined to play the part of beneficent genius, for something of importance accrued from most of his actions, and one result of his doctoring was that when a raft of splendid logs lay ready to be towed to the coast a river man who had been a chronic sufferer each time the work grew arduous falling mysteriously sick again desired a change of air instead of medicine. Cummings got out his funnel, but the patient, quoting a certain proverb in the coast palaver, observed, "One time one fool—two time one dam fool, sah! and I savvy them thing too much. You dun send me, Cappy Clarry."

Clarence spent some time with him which was not thrown away, and returning, spread out before his com-

rades a copy he had made in the outpost of a rough hydrographic survey. "It's incomplete, but no doubt tolerably accurate so far as it goes, and I've added observations of my own," he said. "Now, according to civilised knowledge, the only outlet from this delectable region is down the Silver River, but, in order to escape your treatment, Cummings, the sick man asserts he can show me deep water all the way from here to Sewin's Creek, partly plotted in dotted lines yonder. The mail boats pass its mouth, and I think you can grasp the importance of the discovery."

"I can," said Lyle. "Apparently very few white men have ever passed Warrimba, and if we have practically disappeared it's so much the better. Now, while Okambo seems strangely dilatory, I gather it's feared he'll wipe out Shotille when he does move. Therefore, if we float splendid mahogany down to the Silver River the Amalgamation agents will follow our trail to treat with Okambo. If, on the contrary, we ship from Sewin's Creek we're out of their sphere, and the small independents would fancy it had come from the Lagos border, where I heard there was some timber. It's a splendid back way if you can trust that nigger."

"Exactly!" said Clarence. "I'm inclined to chance it."

He did so, and day after day the launch panted through devious shadowy tunnels no white man, and very few black ones, had ever seen before, with the great logs surging along astern. Also, having the mail boats' timebill, he made a détour before he met one of them homeward bound and almost empty. "It's grand wood," said her purser. "Ought to make your fortune if you can get much of it. They're bringing a little out over Lagos bar, but by the time they've paid for several shipments and handlings there can't be much profit. Now, we've no schedule for hardwood from these rivers, so we'll take it as a favour at Lagos rates."

"You're very good," and the instincts of Markham senior awoke within his son, as he answered the purser.

"Haven't you to wait several tides for the Lagos branch boat or when there's bad surf at Axim, and then

disable half your winches trying, when she's rolling rails under, to heave the big logs in? Here it's dead smooth water, and I'll bring you all we cut at one-third under what you ask. Don't take it unless you like; I can easily steam round and cable the agents of the opposition boats."

"You're a smart man, and remind me about the tales they still tell of old Markham," said the purser. "If we bring her home empty there'll be berths vacant, so, subject to the office's approval, it's a standing bargain. Come aboard and have dinner on the strength of it."

Clarence shipped the mahogany and left several letters, besides a cablegram which was to delight the heart of his father, with the purser, and some days later lounged in the stern sheets of the launch steaming back to Mahogany Camp in a state of complacent satisfaction. It was, as usual, fiercely hot, and the river flamed before his aching eyes dazzlingly, though his sable crew lay like salamanders soaking in the radiation. The keenest vigilance also relaxes in the drowsy heat of the afternoon when every living thing which can lies still in the shadow, and he did not notice a large, white-painted canoe creeping on through the dimness under the branches until it was too late to avoid it. He was both glad and sorry when he saw it contained four Europeans, one of whom was Florence Ellory, for fresh reasons had arisen to render it necessary that he should continue to hide his identity until it was settled whether Okambo or Shotille would rule that district. For a moment he smiled drily, reflecting that the urgency of the State's business might justify a Government launch passing at full speed, and then, catching sight of a smile of welcome on a woman's face, sheered the craft alongside.

"Very glad to see you, but you don't look so strong as you might do," said missionary Legh. "This climate sets its mark on all of us who can't take life easily. Miss Ellory was just wondering what had become of you—it is easy to grow interested in one's first cure, you see."

He laughed with frank good nature, and Florence, who had glanced anxiously at the newcomer earlier, did not for some reason do so now. Clarence seemed much older than he did on board the steamer, she thought. The

clammy heat of the African forest accounted for the pallor which replaced the bronze on his skin, and a certain restless nervousness. He, on his part, was startled to notice the change in Florence. Her eyes were too brilliant, and the dead whiteness of the rest of her face, which might have been modelled in alabaster, heightened by contrast the faint flush in the centre of either cheek. Mrs. Johnston was, however, the same as ever—prim, colourless, and staid; and she favoured the stranger with one swift, suspicious glance before rousing her husband, who was stretched on a roll of matting, drowsily content.

"I came down to pick up my colleague," continued Legh, "and we had intended visiting another village where we had once some influence, but there has been rain inland, and the stream is running strong."

Clarence glanced at the paddle boys, panting in tight white jackets, and the glassy slide of current, then, casting prudence to the winds, seized the opportunity, saying, "I shall be very glad to take you and tow the canoe if you will come on board my launch."

They did so, and the Reverend Peter Johnston, who lounged luxuriously on the locker cushions, observed, "This is considerably nicer, and I often ponder on the advantages that might result from Warrimba being supplied with a properly fitted launch. It would extend our field of influence—and a canoe, as you may have noticed, is a most uncomfortable craft."

Mrs. Johnston favoured her spouse with a glance of warning, while Legh, who did not see it, catching the twinkle in Markham's eyes, laughed genially. "There is truth in that," he said; "especially if the canoe is sun-cracked and leaks fast, but I have been admiring your vessel. I presume she came from the Calabar district, for there are none quite like her on the Silver River. They, however, keep you short of paint, and you do not parade your weapons. Perhaps in times like these it is wiser not to flaunt the crimson before the rampant bull."

Clarence felt that Mrs. Johnston was watching him intently, and grew uneasy as he answered, "She was built recently to steam at the highest speed, and"—he glanced at Florence—"I am the more proud of her because

she once rendered a service to the inhabitants of Warrimba. As to weapons—my task is an entirely peaceful one, unless the bushmen attack me."

The girl looked down shyly, and to Markham's relief the missionary changed the subject. Then, while cotton-wood, creeper festoon, and tufted palm slid by, the little party chatted merrily—that is to say, all except Mrs. Johnston, who rarely unbent very far, and her thin lips set in a straight line as she listened to Clarence's sallies. The shadow of the dark land brooded over them, but for that very reason they made the most of each evanescent opportunity for innocent amusement. It was very brief, for those swamps are the home of tragedy, and all too soon they steamed up a foul creek into sight of the backsliding village.

The surrounding forest seemed curiously still, the palm fronds hung in motionless, fretted curves. Not a leaf moved, and a quivering haze of heat danced above the glaring sand. But in the cool shadow beside the largest hut there stood a group of negroes with matchets in their hands, while others, partly hidden, seemed to be watching them furtively. A large canoe lay abreast of the landing, with smears of white paint or clay upon it, and Legh's face grew suddenly grave as he said, "Will you slow down the engines and then take these glasses and come forward with me? Ophthalmia has somewhat spoiled my vision."

Clarence did so, and while he focussed the binoculars Legh said, "Sweep them round the whole place, and tell me what you see."

Clarence noticed several things which struck him as ominous: first that nobody seemed to follow his usual vocation in all the village, while the very attitude of the black figures crouching among the undergrowth suggested fear. Then his attention concentrated itself upon the group before what seemed to be the headman's hut, and he said, "I see six men with matchets who look as if they were strangers and had been trained to arms—parallel cheek slashes, and tattooed slightly, in lines instead of moles. One has white rings about his eyes. Probably somebody's particular bodyguard."

"King Okambo's," said the missionary, sighing. "This

village is really his, though Shotille claimed its suzerainty. The man with the white rings is either executioner or an acolyte of the sacrificial order. Of course, you know white is the fatal colour. But can you see nothing else?"

The anxiety in his companion's voice was evident, and Clarence answered slowly, "Yes: there is a man squatting bound close against the hut inside a line drawn about him. He is marked with the same white pigment. Near the next hut there are more men, apparently belonging to the village, with matchets and clubs."

"You can put down the glasses," and Clarence stared at his companion, whose face was transfigured. His lips and nostrils quivered and his eyes blazed. "They shall not have him. The land is already drenched with blood," he said. "I do not presume to teach you your duty, but mine at least is clear."

"I don't understand," said Clarence; and the other looked at him in blank astonishment before he answered, "You must have learned a little about the customs of this locality. That poor wretch is destined for a fetich sacrifice. He is a prisoner or slave, and Okambo claims his tribute of flesh and blood."

For just one moment Clarence hesitated, remembering how much depended upon his prudence; then he said, "I am new to the country, and not above taking advice from you. This launch can steam over ten knots, and she has full steam up."

Legh went back to the cockpit and explained the position, adding, "The boys will paddle you down the creek in the canoe, and you will wait at a safe distance while between us Mr. Seaton and I effect a rescue. Peter, I think you could help us most by remaining here ready to start the launch full speed the moment we come on board. I am sorry we cannot spare you these sights, Miss Ellory, but as they are unfortunately only too common you must, I fear, endeavour to grow accustomed to them."

Clarence, most unreasonably, felt he could hate the speaker for the solicitude in his face, and was conscious of a sudden bitterness when the girl returned him a glance of enthusiasm. "Oh, you must go and save him, whatever it costs. They dare not hurt you," she said.

There was no doubt Florence was in a state of hero-worship, and Markham chafed. What right had this man to parade his virtues and compel her to do him reverence? he asked himself, forgetting that the missionary could not help it, and that if the woman had cherished a more tender feeling she would not so willingly have bidden him undertake a dangerous task. Perhaps Legh recognised this, for momentarily his eyes grew wistful, while Clarence, seeing there was no word for him, reversed the engines, pulling the helm over until he had run the craft alongside the bank with her bows turned ready towards safer water.

Mrs. Johnston was apparently the only one quite unmoved, and she said coldly, "It is not a question of avoiding risks, but whether the results will justify them. Have you considered whether this is judicious?"

Legh's forehead contracted, and he answered wearily, "One grows tired of the word. How far have our best plans carried of late? And if we only did what could be proved judicious there would be nothing accomplished. A fellow-creature lies yonder waiting a cruel death—and I think the future will be provided for even without our help."

"I will either go or stay, wherever I can do best service," said Johnston, grasping the greasy engine gear reluctantly with a fat white hand, and when the two men stepped ashore Clarence felt a thrill run through him as Florence, looking at him with anxiety stamped upon her face, said shyly, "May I wish God speed—to both of you?"

The closing of the sentence was an afterthought, he fancied, and he listened vacantly while his companion said, "We must trust to moral force and the white man's prestige, for any violence would be fatal. That is why I refused the help of your black followers. Perfect self-command and an assumption of absolute fearlessness are the main essentials."

Meantime, their advent had been noticed. A horn brayed discordantly, and dusky men gathered round the largest hut with weapons in their hands, but Clarence did not feel the dismay he might well have done. He was going to snatch a victim out of the grasp of King Okambo,

with whom he knew it was quite possible he might have to treat for permission to cut timber, and it is the height of folly for a man who hopes to win a livelihood in his dominions to defy a fetich potentate. Still, Florence had bidden him "God speed," and that, with her evident fear for his safety, was sufficient, even if the sight of the helpless victim had not stirred his blood.

If Legh's fearlessness was assumed, the assumption was perfect. He walked forward cheerfully with a light in his eyes, while Clarence loosed the revolver in the belt beneath his thin duck jacket, freeing the lower buttons so that his hand might fall readily upon its butt. Twice more the horn called, and when they stood before the headman's hut several score of naked men clustered about them. Some regarded them with mere curiosity, others with malevolent suspicion, and Okambo's retainers fingered their weapons, for they had heard that the white men down river published edicts forbidding human sacrifice, and sometimes led expeditions inland to enforce them.

Legh addressed the headman, who answered through an interpreter, "God palaver no fit to help us; all them people lib for fear the Ju-Ju now. Headman he like them white men too much, but if they lib for here Okambo burn all his house up."

"Who is this man?" Clarence asked sternly, and the ruler of the village hesitated before he made reply, "Okambo say send me slave. This be very bad man, sah, t'ief too much and no good for anything, so we dun send him."

"What will Okambo's people do with him?" asked Clarence aside, and Legh shuddered, "Either bury him alive, perhaps to the neck and let the insects complete their devilish work, or lash him between two bent-down trees." Then changing into the native idiom he said, "Listen, all of you. If Okambo slays this man the Gods I serve will surely punish you. They are great and powerful."

There was a wrathful murmur, and while Clarence slipped one hand inside his jacket the picture burned itself into his memory—the rolling eyes, dusky faces, glint of sunlight on steel, brassy, pitiless heavens, the half-

frightened, half-boastful headman who had once declared himself a Christian, and the trembling captive with the ominous white smears upon him.

"Tell him!" and Markham's voice rang out with the crisp sharpness of one who had handled drilled men. "Make it quite plain that Okambo shall not have this prisoner—I claim him. What the Gods may do is not my business, but if harm comes to him or us the White Queen's soldiers will hang the headman before his own hut, and leave this place in ashes!"

Again a savage growl broke through the drowsy heat, for there were those present who had seen vengeance, personified by the White Queen's servant, Major Carwardine, overtake the offender. Then in the silence that followed one of Okambo's men, stooping, drew lines about the captive in the sand, and rendered into English his warning ran, "That is the sign of Okambo, and this of the Ju-Ju. It is death to the first who passes either of them."

The captive shrank further back, glancing at Clarence in mute entreaty, but Legh with ready wit took up the challenge. "No Ju-Ju made of clay has the power to hurt men. Look, and you shall see."

Again there was silence, followed by a murmur of relief and surprise when nothing whatever happened as he stepped inside the circle. Clarence came next with a bound, patted the negro's shoulder, stooped and rubbed the white smears from it, then, while the man crept close in to his feet, traced also a succession of lines in the sand. When this was done he stood up, saying, "Tell your headman that is a Ju-Ju greater than any of Okambo's. It can bring up steamboats filled with devil guns."

It was not unreasoning national pride which guided his swift forefinger through the yielding sand, for more than a few of the beholders had seen the cross of St. George with the union in the quarter streaming from the stern of Protectorate launch and light-draught coast cruiser through the smoke of quick-firing guns, notably when a certain stockade supposed to be impregnable crumbled under them. It had therefore acquired a partly mystical as well as material value.

"We must take him out now or never," said the missionary. "Remember the moral supremacy, and show no surprise at anything as you follow me."

Clarence grasped the captive's shoulder and stepped forward, while, coldly impervious to insult or scowl, the missionary moved on through the crowd, which opened before him. What the pair attempted had been successfully accomplished before, when two officers felled a chief who had plotted their murder on his own threshold and forced a way through his infuriated people safely, and it was known that retribution followed violence to a white man; so, though a score of weapons would have been lifted had either shown doubt or fear, the quiet audacity of the strangers had its due effect. Still, it was nervous work, and Clarence could hear his heart thumping until it almost drowned his comrade's warning, "Trust to your ears, and don't look round unnecessarily. The worst danger lies behind, and if either of us is wounded they will for their own safety make an end of both."

They won thirty yards without molestation, and then suddenly one of Okambo's men lunged with a matchet at the preacher. Legh's career would have ended there and then, but that Clarence, reading his purpose in the negro's eyes, was quicker, and flinging his right fist forward over the other's arm drove the revolver butt into the centre of the dusky face, with the whole weight of his body behind it. The negro went down backwards, and lay where he fell, and there followed a few seconds of tense expectancy, during which Markham stood breathing hard with the glinting bead on the muzzle turned upon the thickest of the crowd. He expected annihilation, and his fate hung in the balance, but the villagers had heard of the magic weapon, and none were willing to become the first victim.

"Go on!" he said hoarsely. "I'll promise to stop the next man who lifts his hand even more quickly."

Once more a way was made, and though for the next two minutes Clarence learned the full meaning of the fear of death they came out safely clear of the irate populace upon the trampled sand.

Meantime, the canoe lay waiting further down the creek,

and Florence, perhaps as a relief from the suffocating sense of suspense, said, "Why did you ask if it was judicious? They could not have let the poor wretch die."

The answer was prompt and incisive: "Men die in this land by violence every day, and the head of the Warrimba station is not justified in throwing a very valuable life away."

"But you would not have him most considerate about his own safety?" and Mrs. Johnston smiled pityingly: "No; if the welfare of Warrimba demanded it I would have him sacrifice his life freely. You are young, child, and must learn to guard against hasty impulses. It is Hilary Legh's mission to make Warrimba a great power for good, as it is yours and mine in a minor degree, and neither ill-considered pity nor any passing sentiment should interfere with it."

"Ah!" Florence tried to repress a shudder. "Then you would have let——"

"We neither of us rule Warrimba," said her companion, perhaps not altogether correctly, and Florence felt her heart sink at the stern coldness of the elder lady's policy. Of late she had grown inclined to wonder whether she was really but one tiny part of a great machine, without volition of her own, and liable to be crushed out of existence by the rest of it. She yearned for love, gentleness, warm enthusiasm, life and laughter; and, strange to say, found the attributes of a wider humanity in the ascetic Hilary Legh.

"He is a brave man," said Mrs. Johnston when the two white-clad figures, dwarfed by the distance, were swallowed up among the surging mass of sable ones. "A man in a thousand, and, if only for his very lovable weaknesses, was not meant to live alone."

Then she too lapsed into silence, and Florence, quivering with fear and an indefinite indignation, stared shorewards anxiously. There was nothing visible but a surging of the crowd, until one group opened up, and for a moment she held her breath as she caught the glint of steel in a negro's hand. Then she could not repress a cry when the black man went down headlong, and Clarence strode forward with crooked right arm while the crowd gave

back before him. This was the man who had kissed her hand, and now, while terrified for his safety, she was proud of him.

Mrs. Johnston perhaps guessed her thoughts, for she said, "It was well done. They are opening a way for him;" and Florence dared not glance ashore. "Ah! they are almost safe now. I am thankful." Then, as if ashamed of any trace of excitement, she added, "You must learn to discriminate, my child. There is in most men the same lust of combat which characterises savage beasts, but that is not courage. One is foolishly apt to attribute the higher quality to any man displaying reckless hardihood. But, beyond gratitude for his assistance to Hilary, we can neither of us have any interest in the other!"

There was no mistaking this warning, for on occasion the unofficial ruler of Warrimba spoke with a frankness that verged on brutality, and Florence's face to the forehead was no longer pallid. Yet the elder woman already dominated her so far that she made no answer, and only shrank further from her as one without human sympathy.

Legh and Clarence were near the launch now, walking faster with the negro between them, when some of Okambo's men, mustering their courage for a last attempt, broke into a run. Johnston hailed in warning, and, turning a moment, Markham fired his revolver over the heads of the foremost, shouting, "We have a good start, run."

Johnston cast off the moorings, tried to hold the Krooboys on board, while hardly had he grasped the starting-lever than, with a leap and scramble, two breathless white men and several friendly black ones fell on board the launch. The propeller was whirring before Clarence seized the helm, and when the pursuers gained the bank the vessel, ringed with white froth, was racing down stream.

"We were successful," said Clarence, when they picked up the canoe. "The whole devil priesthood could not take him from us now;" and Florence looked full at Mrs. Johnston as she said, "It was most gallantly done."

Five minutes earlier she would not have dared, but

now she felt strengthened by the young soldier's presence, while Legh smiled as he answered, "Spare us, Miss Ellory. I am afraid it was hardly wise, but we are only men, you see."

Markham looked at him in wonder, then opened his mouth and shut it, saying nothing.

Later he stopped the engines at the entrance to Warrimba Creek, and Johnston said, "It might be better if you took the rescued man. Those people would hardly dare to loot Warrimba before war breaks out, but his presence might be a strong incentive."

Markham considered the request that the said incentive should remain with him a decidedly cool one, but, remembering that Florence lived at Warrimba, assented, and when they parted held out his hand heartily to Legh, saying, "If ever I have to face long odds in earnest I should like you beside me."

"I hope the need will never come," said the missionary.

## XIV

### LUALA'S DEFECTION

When rumours of trouble spread through the bush and by twos and threes the more vigorous of the native flock deserted Warrimba, one person of consequence remained faithful, and she was a woman of lighter colour than the rest, whom Mrs. Johnston had found wandering in the forest carrying a starving child. Now Legh had set up a small weaving-shed, and Luala, who sprang from one of the intelligent Moslem tribes dwelling further north, displayed considerable skill in teaching her companions to weave the beautiful country cloth, which, dyed blue with native indigo, surpasses in quality the product of the looms of Lancashire. She was far removed from a savage, and, learning European customs quickly, became an influence at Warrimba. The child also throve, and when Florence appeared took to her, while she, hungry

for something to expend her affection upon, accepted his devotion gratefully.

Massabu was then a little, rotund creature, with skin like dusty velvet, and great wistful eyes, docile and winsome, as most negro children are. He would sit long with African patience at Florence's feet, watching her thin fingers busy with coloured silk, or, when he learned she loved them, toddle into the edge of the forest and return with chubby hands filled with scented lilies, which he gleefully thrust upon her. The mother was not jealous. So far as one could judge, she was prouder of her position as Mrs. Johnston's assistant than she was of the child, until one day a glimpse of her real nature appeared. It was a still and oppressive afternoon, when Florence entered the weaving-shed where Massabu lay fretfully among a heap of cotton, and when she seated herself he crawled towards her, his hands filled with fragments of broken thread.

Saying nothing, he curled himself up beside her feet and commenced winding thread on a spool, and as it happened Legh came in just then. Until Florence appeared he had spared no thought for anything except his mission, but a great change came then, and he sighed as he noticed the white-robed figure bending over the tiny black one, with a caressing hand laid on the little woolly head, and a face that reminded him of pictures he had seen of the Madonna.

"That is right, M'sabu," a low voice said in a crude attempt at the native idiom. "Wind them so together, and we will weave a robe with them. You must learn so much, 'Sabu, and some day you will go out a wise man to teach the black people."

The child looked up at her, wondering, with a curious gravity in his big eyes, but Luala, who had heard the Moslem mallah, broke in, "It is not so written for him. His father was a soldier of the Sultan, and his name is a soldier's, Massa Saba. That is why I gave it him when, sprinkling the drops of water, our white father would call him Kerlistofer. Some day he will serve the White Queen as sergeant, or carry an Emir's standard against the unbelievers."

Hilary Legh looked startled, and slightly chagrined, as Luala, dropping the cotton, stood up with the pride of a warrior race showing in her pose; then she added, more gently, "But the white people are good to me and him, and they know many things. If they know the charm for sleep let them bring rest to him. A terror came upon him in the darkness, and he lies awake trembling."

Florence, who understood little of the woman's idiom, fumbled in her pocket, and produced with an air of guiltiness a gaudy cardboard box containing chocolate, which somebody had sent her from England. 'Sabu's face lit up at the sight of the silver-wrapped dainties, and when he had eaten one or two Florence lifted him upon her knee and crooned an English lullaby. She was almost sorry she had done so, for it recalled painful memories. Then her eyes brightened with pleasure as the little velvety limbs curled in closer to her, and Florence had lustrous eyes, while now the whiteness of her skin heightened their brilliancy. Presently 'Sabu's lashes closed, and when she laid him on some soft cotton peacefully asleep the mother, bending over him, said in a Northern dialect which Legh alone understood, though with an apparent effort of memory, "The white woman has the gift, but she would not hurt you, 'Sabu. Still for safety——" and she moved her hands above him. "And it is Allah who sends the sleep."

Florence and Legh went out together, and the man said, "I do not know whether to be pleased or sorry—and who can understand these Northern people, with their mingled savagery and traditions of partly enlightened faiths? You did not grasp her meaning? She said there was virtue in your look and touch, and I think so too, but they cannot discriminate between the power of human tenderness and a supernatural gift. Perhaps they are not wholly foolish."

"What should I have done?" asked Florence; and the missionary answered, "Only what you did; but one must temper compassion with discretion, and yours may prove a dangerous gift. However, I must not dishearten you, and there are signs that these people are

commencing to love you. It is not surprising—who could help it?"

The speaker checked himself, for, though he had discovered that his interest in Florence far exceeded that of a teacher in a promising pupil, the words escaped him involuntarily. Florence showed no sign that she deduced any inner meaning, and answered gravely, "I have longed that it might be so, but dared not hope for it. At first they even mocked me, and I grew terrified of failing altogether!"

Legh changed the subject. It was evident that if his time ever came it was far off yet, and he talked of other things until they entered the residence, where he sat alone in his study staring straight before him. Next morning he sought Florence, and she noticed his face was unusually serious as he said, "'Sabu is ill. He was evidently sickening yesterday, and I have had him carried into the hospital hut. I cannot quite diagnose the complaint, but it is specially important that you should succeed in nursing him through it. Of course, you know few of the negro's maladies are infectious to Europeans."

"It would make little difference if they were. I will go with you now," said Florence; and all that day, and for several days and nights afterwards, she scarcely moved from her post beside the tiny sufferer's cot. At first he tossed in restless torment, then lay still with burning skin, laying a little hot hand in hers at intervals, while the mother crouched in the doorway watching the white nurse with manifest suspicion, until Florence grew worn out in mind and body as the hours dragged by.

"I am afraid the poor little fellow is sinking in spite of all we can do," the missionary said one day. "But his life is very valuable, and even at the risk of exhausting you we must spare no effort to preserve it. I wonder where Luala has gone. She has disappeared since early morning."

During the afternoon Mrs. Johnston brought her in some tea, and looking at the nurse said almost gently, "Hilary is anxious about you. I have seldom seen him so distressed."

Florence showed no sign of more than a casual interest,

and the lady, who looked keenly for it, continued, "He is a very patient and skilful man, and you must do your utmost to second him. Even if it seems cruelty, we are forced to keep you here, and—remembering there is always disappointment—you will, I know, if the worst comes, brace your courage to meet another trial."

Florence was too weary to connect the words with more than the probable loss of the child she had grown to love, which she would feel severely enough, and she was no wiser when Mrs. Johnston departed. Next morning Luala returned, draggled, faint, and torn by thorns, carrying a bundle of herbs, and presently laid a few of them on the sick child's breast, murmuring as she did so. She also brought a decoction in a calabash which she desired to administer, but Florence prevented it on the plea that M'sabu was sleeping. Then the woman sat huddled in the doorway until at last, worn out by hurried travel, she sank into slumber. Florence promptly emptied the calabash, and felt tempted to refill it with legitimate medicine of somewhat similar colour, but, being in all things honest, did not do so. Then, and this was distinctly foolish under the circumstances, though perhaps natural to one of her upbringing, she pushed aside the heathen charm of plaited leaves from the tiny patient's breast.

Luala, awakening later, saw what she had done, broke out into a torrent of words the listener did not understand, then crouched outside in the sunglare in sullen despair, and it was evening when Legh heard the story. His fingers clenched themselves as he listened, but he only said, "I am very sorry, but how could you have guessed? In the meantime, you must have rest, and we can only hope that against all reasonable expectations we shall be permitted to save him."

Florence slept soundly in her own room that night, and how it happened or whose fault it was she never learned, but when the moon sank west Johnston surprised a woman slipping away into the forest with a dying child in her arms. They were brought back, and Legh spared no effort, but when Florence opened her eyes she heard that Massabu was dead.

He was buried the same day, Legh dreading what might follow as he read the service, and some time passed before he joined his companions, who sat together in moody silence on the verandah. It was hot, and Florence, who lay in a lounge, haggard and dejected, never forgot the heavy scent of lilies which filled the steamy air. Indeed, in after years the fragrance of any flower resembling them stirred her memory painfully. A wild-eyed woman, with sand and ashes in her hair, strode to the foot of the stairway, and, raising one hand aloft, spoke fast and furiously in a mixed idiom. Florence comprehended part of the disjointed sentences.

"I live no more with the white men, but go back to my own people in the good land beyond the forest. Their Gods are very cruel, and their hearts are bad—for she who lies there with deceit and magic has slain my son. There is no God but Allah, the rest are devils—devils and djins the white men call upon. I go far from this country; but first——"

The hatred in the dusky face appalled one trembling listener as the speaker changed into the tongue of the hinterland, and it was well that only Legh understood the Arab curse. Florence, however, realised the full significance of what had happened at last. Then Luala strode away, and though Legh, who followed, spoke soothingly, she was seen no more at Warrimba. When he came back Mrs. Johnston signalled her spouse, who withdrew with her, and Legh halted beside Florence.

"It is very cruel. We tried so hard to save him—and I loved the poor little thing so," she said. "That woman's look will haunt me, and I know it was some terrible disaster she tried to call down on me. This is a lonely, pitiless country, and already I miss the touch of his little soft hands and the patter of his tiny feet. He seemed to trust me to bring him relief, and it was very hard to be able to do nothing."

That she should open her heart to him was comforting to the man, but he refrained from answering as he longed to, and drawing near her said, "I hope you will always rest assured that when you need one you have a friend in me."

"I know!" and Florence's voice betrayed her gratitude. "Now I see how carefully you kept the horrible superstition hidden from me. I could fully trust you, and am glad it is so. There are very few people one can talk openly to, and sympathy is precious in Africa."

It was spoken in all innocency, for Florence, worn down by want of sleep and troubled by what had happened, longed for fellowship and comfort, but Legh was shaken off his guard. When some time earlier the knowledge that the future would be hopeless without her dawned upon him, he had resolved to wait with patience, but the loneliness of the girl appealed to his pity as well as love, and he said quietly, "There is a way in which I could offer you full protection as well as devotion and sympathy, and I have been longing for the right to do so. I should not have told you yet, but find I could not keep the secret, and with mutual love and confidence one can be happy even here under the shadow."

"If you mean—please don't; I can't bear it now," said Florence, rising out of her chair, but Legh, stretching out his hand, drew her gently down again.

"You must at least hear me out," he said. "I mean as your husband."

She could not escape him, and he stood looking down upon her compassionately, perhaps too much so, for Florence's cheek grew crimson as she answered, "I should never make a fit wife for you—and you are mistaken. It is only chivalrous pity prompts you to ask me."

"You are wrong," and Legh's voice was almost harsh. "It is not pity, but love I offer, and love and help I ask from you. You can help me; there is a power you do not realise in you. But that is not my plea—it is that without you life would never be the same to me."

The former plea was a strong one, perhaps the strongest he could have chosen. From her childhood Florence had been taught there was no task so worthy as aiding the work of evangelisation in her degree, and now a man she reverenced appealed to her to increase his usefulness in that service. Though there is a distinction between

love and reverence, she might even have yielded had not the face of Clarence Markham risen by some trick of fancy before her memory.

Meantime Legh gazed at her in dry-lipped suspense: "Have you no answer, Florence, or dare I take your silence as assent?"

Florence rose wearily. "No, I am sorry—very sorry—more so than I can tell, but you are mistaken; it would be folly for both of us. You must marry a strong, brave woman."

"I have found her," said Hilary Legh. "The best in all the world to me!"

"No," and Florence drew back a pace or two. "You do not know. It is an honour, but you must not urge me. I have only respect, but no love for you. I am weak and tired, and you will not distress me?"

The man mastered himself with an effort, and the light faded out of his eyes. "Of course not. I should have known better, but a man in love is selfish," he said with a tell-tale huskiness. "Even now I will try to do what you wish me, but dare I ask, if you will forgive me, if the reason is that there is some one more fortunate than me?"

"No," and Florence regarded the verandah planking with close attention. "Nobody ever—ever spoke of love to me. But again, it is, you must believe me, impossible."

"Then there is still hope," the man said. "You need not grow uneasy—I will keep silence and wait very patiently. At least I have won your liking, and perhaps the rest may come in fullness of time. I will not let you snatch this faint hope from me, but meantime—in proof that you need not fear me—merely as your friend as well as physician, I order you to lie still and rest the next few days. You may read a little if you like, but it must be something cheerful and amusing."

He was gone, and Florence was glad to do his bidding, but it happened that evening Legh said, "Poor Luala reminded me of a task I have always felt a great longing for, and once peace is restored I shall beg permission to make a journey to the North."

The Reverend Peter Johnston looked up at him

drowsily. "It is a very trying country up there, and there are absolutely no comforts," he said. "For myself, I feel I could be much more useful at Warrimba. We can get a few necessaries from the coast here," he added reflectively.

Legh smiled a little, for he refrained from condemning other men's weaknesses, but Mrs. Johnston divined more from his words than he intended. She seldom, however, moved without due consideration, and waited until Florence was nearly herself again before she said, "I have no desire to force your confidence, Florence—though in a measure I have perhaps a moral right to—but I think you should tell me what you said to unsettle Hilary. I have for some time guessed his wishes regarding you."

Florence had found it impossible to keep a secret from her superior, and with reluctance she told what had happened, while when she concluded Mrs. Johnston frowned as she said, "I am sorry—even disappointed in you. My child, you are hardly likely twice to win the love of a man like Hilary Legh."

"I am also sorry," said Florence, avoiding the searching eyes, "but I could not think of him as—as my husband."

"The flesh is weak," and Mrs. Johnston sighed, possibly thinking of her own husband; "but you must remember that—that your calling comes first. Your union would have bound him to Warrimba, and he would have made this station illustrious. A man and wife both devoted to one object are together almost invincible. Child, did you remember this?"

"Would you have had me marry a man I did not love for the glory of Warrimba?" and Mrs. Johnston, startled by the ring of indignation, raised a protesting hand.

"No; but any one in your position should have tried to love him, and made quite sure it was impossible before deciding. Even then—but I dare not meddle rashly with these matters, and I trust if ever he speaks again you will, for the sake of your own peace, consider—and consider well."

Florence was disturbed in mind after that interview, not only because she felt there was some reason in what

her superior said, but because she also dreaded the power that lady possessed of turning what she hoped for into accomplished facts. Next morning when she entered the weaving-shed there was further trouble in store for her. The women who had children drove them in a panic out of the door, or trembled before her, avoiding her glance, and when evening came she shut herself in her own room, feeling worse than hopeless—utterly useless. It seemed quite clear that, being credited with malevolence and supernatural powers, there was an end of any good influence she had ever possessed at Warrimba, and it is hard even for a strong man to discover that he is an abject failure in his chosen vocation. She was scarcely well enough to withstand the shock of the discovery, and before a week had passed went down of fever. Legh, attending her in the capacity of physician, guessed when once she rambled deliriously at something which clouded his face with anger.

Later he sought Mrs. Johnston, and said with wholly unusual sternness, "I want to ask a plain question, just because there are occasions when there is no distinction between cowardice and superfluous delicacy. I dare say you catch my meaning—have you brought any pressure to bear upon Miss Ellory?"

Mrs. Johnston was not a timid woman. Indeed, she usually erred on the side of boldness, and she answered with perfect composure, "I object to the word pressure. I certainly pointed out that benefits to both of you and this service might result from such a union."

For once Legh nearly lost his temper, and strode twice across the room before he answered, "You will forgive me, madame, for saying that I still consider the word I used the right one. Once for all, I will not have her coerced into looking favourably on me. Heaven knows how I long for it—but it must be of her own will, if it ever happens, that she comes to me. Can you not see that you are rousing a natural antagonism against both of us? Your pardon for speaking strongly, but—it was needful."

He went out, and Mrs. Johnston said, half aloud, "A natural antagonism! That would be so in England, but

it is different in Africa. It would only be for her own good!" but just then the Reverend Peter Johnston came in.

"I only saw Hilary savage once before—and he was savage just now," he said. "I don't know what you were discussing, but I couldn't help hearing a few words he flung out, and guess at the drift of it. I'm not a clever man, Marian, and you generally get your way, but if you attempt to worry that poor soul any more I'll—I'll certainly prevent you."

Mrs. Johnston favoured her liege with a freezing stare. He was as a rule dutifully submissive, but the easy-going man had a kindly heart and could rise in his own way almost to greatness on rare occasions. So he added stubbornly, "I said I will prevent you, and I mean it. She is a good girl, and so long as the Society nominates—me—practical manager of Warrimba she shall marry or not just as she pleases—poor little thing!"

His wife had sufficient sense to know that when the patient man turns at last he usually proves a resolute adversary, and retired in silence.

## XV

### HOW CLARENCE BROUGHT THE ICE

It was known in Mahogany Camp that small bands of the followers both of Okambo and Shotille stalked each other along the lower river, besides keeping watch for any trade goods that might be smuggled out, but except that the creeks were thus blockaded there was no definite news. Clarence also concluded from flying rumours that the white officials' warnings might even prevent hostilities, though some of the natives said Okambo was only waiting for a season when the Ju-Ju were unusually auspicious. In either case, Markham's party had, so they hoped, a safe outlet, but one day, when the uncertainty grew trying, Lyle said, "When

things are too peaceful one can generally look out for trouble; and I've been getting fidgety. You might get hold of some information that wasn't all lying if you took a run down river. The next raft can't be ready for some time; but I wouldn't bring any more Ju-Ju sacrifices back with you. It's quite possible Okambo's priesthood haven't forgotten the last one. We may have to suffer for that fellow's rescue yet."

Clarence was not sorry to be furnished with a legitimate excuse for steaming down river. The monotonous task of watching and holding a band of very ingenious, if apparently thick-headed savages to their work grew irksome, and the only excitement that relieved it resulted from a cunning attempt at one of the party's life. There was also another reason which, in spite of misgivings, led him to proceed as far as Warrimba, where he found Legh looking strangely grave.

"I was passing," the timber cutter explained with a bow to Mrs. Johnston, "and couldn't resist the temptation of spending an hour with you."

"We are always glad to see you," answered the missionary. "But a further trouble has overtaken unfortunate Warrimba. Miss Ellory is sick of fever, and I fear dangerously ill."

It seemed to Clarence that the glare of sunlight grew suddenly dim. During the last few hours of his journey he had been wondering how Florence would greet him, and now she was, it might even be, dying. He recognised one all-important fact in that moment, and his feelings betrayed themselves to at least one observer. He forgot the need of caution in his anxiety, and stood with the big sun hat lifted from his streaming brow, staring at the speaker with a dismay which did not escape Mrs. Johnston.

"Dangerously ill!" he repeated. "But you have hopes of her recovery? Would it be possible to see her, if only for a minute?"

"Quite impossible!" said Legh. "We have been trying to deceive ourselves into hope, but I am horribly afraid the chance is a very small one. The drugs we most need are exhausted, and we have no ice."

Markham's voice trembled a little in spite of his attempt at steadiness as he asked, "How long could you wait for them?"

"That only the Almighty knows! Perhaps a week—or it might be too late to-morrow. Two degrees rise of temperature would make all the difference. But why do you ask? There is neither ice nor medicine in all this region, though I—we would give all we have for either."

"You shall have them both," said Clarence, swinging round upon his heel. "The bushmen watch the rivers, you say? If all the tribes in Africa kept the blockade I would ram the launch through. You will excuse me, madame, for departing so unceremoniously—I have urgent work to do."

Five minutes later the fastest launch on the rivers was racing down Warrimba Creek with red flame licking her funnel crown, froth piled about her shearing bows, and oily waste flashing among the billets in her gorged furnace. Clarence also screwed a clamp on the safety-valve, and his coloured assistant, who had profited by Cummings' instruction, moved about the throbbing engines in fear and trembling. All day Markham stared forwards with hands clenched on the tiller, while, league after league, cottonwood and palm reeled up and swept astern in swift succession until the red sun dipped, and the fiery trail sped on through the white mist like a comet. How he kept count of the waterways, hard to number in broad daylight, at night, Markham never knew. Perhaps the intensity of his purpose quickened his mental faculties, as it certainly dulled the senses of his body, for he felt neither heat nor thirst nor hunger, only an all-consuming fever of haste. He had been born with a capacity for concentrating the whole forces of his being upon a necessary task, and now the power love gives was added to them. It had needed little to crystallise into a determined purpose his desire for Florence's presence and the sense of satisfaction he felt at the sight of her, and that little had been supplied when he heard that she was in danger.

The negro slept in snatches, whenever he could, and at times brought his master black tea in a greasy can;

twice also he howled in terror when there was a heavy shock as the steel stem rasped over a slothful saurian or a waterlogged cottonwood. Once only he protested, "Them boiler top, he lib for come off, sah. I not like him bad for blow up in lil bit."

"I said more steam," was the grim answer. "The blowing up isn't certain, but if you talk any more this hammer will be," and the trembling negro crammed the furnace.

At last dingy mangroves grew thicker along the miry banks, and, neither asleep nor wholly awake, Clarence, huddled at the tiller, knew the black men who watched the river were somewhere close below. He fancied he heard voices in the thick, hot gloom at night, and once the crash of an overloaded flintlock gun, as well as the beat of paddles several times, but throbbing under utmost pressure the launch raced through, and fortune still favoured her helmsman, for it was dark when she swept down the Silver River towards Markham's factory. Clarence could straighten neither his frame nor his fingers when he limped into it, and Heron, whose nerves were good, positively recoiled at the sight of him.

"Is that you, Mr. Markham?" he said. "You nearly startled the wits out of me. Hassal, get him out something neat to drink—and where are the rest of you? You haven't lost them all—have you?"

"No," said Clarence drowsily. "They're all well. We found the mahogany, too. Cabled my father, and shipped one load home. Couldn't get through to let you know. But I can't go into details. I want some ice and these drugs. It's a question of life and death!"

"Got most of the drugs," said Heron, glancing at the scribbled list. "Both your father and the man who wrote that knew what they were about. Used up our last ice, but there's a refrigerating mail boat inside the bar, and I'll bluff her purser into parting with half a hundredweight. Who is it—Cummings or Lyle?"

"Neither!" said Clarence. "I can't answer questions now," and Heron, taking him by the shoulder, almost pitched him into a canvas cot in the adjoining room.

"Lie down and sleep; you're utterly played out," he

said. "I'm going for the ice. We can talk in a few hours, when I come back."

Heron returned in two, but waited several more, at the risk of being abused for it, before he proceeded to awaken the sleeper by waving a lighted candle before his eyes. It is not always wise to rouse a worn-out man fresh from the miasmatic forest too abruptly. It proved efficacious, and Clarence, who had carried his anxieties with him into the realms of sleep, sat up, saying, "Have you got the ice, and what is the time?"

"It's here. Not long after midnight, and there's a good meal ready for you," was the answer. "Can't wait?—you'll just have to. You're Northop Markham's son, but I'm agent in charge of this factory, and when you're fit, but not before, I'll give you leave to start. There's a kerosene can full of water on the verandah, and a boy waiting to pour it over you."

Clarence submitted with reluctance, and while he ate told portions of his story in hot haste, perhaps not very clearly. Still, Heron gathered the gist of it and when his guest was ready to start laughed as he said, "Well done! That explains the tale of the mysterious white adventurer Smithers told the Government men about. There is a fierce debate going on as to whether you're a myth seen when you weren't there by a not quite sober man, a white clerk who absconded from Lagos setting up as a native king, or an armed smuggler, and if I was fond of betting I might make a small fortune over you. There are two Government launches specially on the look-out for you. Don't come back down this river until the whole trouble's over, for if you use the Sewin Creek route a flotilla wouldn't track you without the help of Shotille, and he has broken off diplomatic relations recently. You can take up the Krooboys—they're eating their heads off!"

On the following evening, as Clarence afterwards heard, Lieutenant Lawrence Seymour of the Protectorate Service sat chewing a damp cigar in the cockpit of a steam launch lying hidden in the gloom of the mangrove branches overhanging a muddy river.

"It's a beastly country," he observed, when once

more the cigar went out. "Five times in the last ten minutes some confounded crawling thing with jaws like a gimlet has gone down the back of my neck. There's another venomous devil drilling into my lumbar regions now, and I'm afraid to squash him. Cigars like sponges, clothes blue mouldy, and, what I complain of most of all, this most inglorious watching for river thieves we never even see."

"It has its good points," said Captain Mulgrave, with a laugh. "Promotion's pretty speedy because your superiors die off, and you can't well be extravagant if you want to. I'll go home a Crœsus if the fever misses me. But what brought you out, if you hate the place so much? A laudable desire to serve your country?"

"Partly that, and partly a gee-gee that wouldn't go after I'd backed him heavily. But seriously, Mulgrave, I'm inclined to wonder if your major-domo isn't a thief, and my double supposed to be smuggling arms purely a myth."

"He might have been drunk," said Mulgrave reflectively. "I'll swear to his comparative honesty. But the sergeant follows the Prophet, eschewing alcohol, and he saw him, as well as the others. You can't get an odd dozen niggers to stick to the same story unless it's true. They may be willing, but their inventive genius outruns their sense of probabilities. There is a white man up there after some mischief, sure enough. That unhung rascal Smithers swore he saw him."

"Smithers sees ghosts," said Seymour. "You can't take that kind of fellow seriously."

Half-an-hour passed. Seymour, whose bones ached under the insidious advances of rheumatism due to the climate, abused everything African he could think of, and the list was comprehensive, until he grew intent when a faint throbbing sound broke through the ghostly silence. "It's a launch," he said. "Might be Hyslop; he's the only man with a decent craft. It can't be relief, because a beneficent Government has provided both Lascelles and us with high-pressure engines warranted to frighten off all the niggers we're trying to catch. That craft has a condenser."

"We'll let her drop out and see," said Mulgrave. "Loose your mooring-line, sergeant."

Noiselessly, with steam cut off as yet, the launch drifted out on the yeasty trickle of ebb tide through the mangroves, and presently a trail of red fire surged through the blackness towards her. There was no mist, only thick, velvety darkness with a few stars faintly luminous between the twin ridges of forest. "Somebody bound North in a hurry," observed Mulgrave. "Hyslop likes to fancy the fate of the nation depends upon his delivering inquiries as to why we used so much paint in frantic haste. Hallo! he sees us. By George! the fellow's sheering across. Give her all the steam, Samson."

There was a whirr beneath the counter, an asthmatical wheezing as the engines quickened their stroke; then the Government steamer, settling down into her stride, forged noisily out towards mid-stream.

"Hillo! Is that you, Hyslop?" hailed Mulgrave, standing up at the tiller, but there was no answer from the other craft, which, circling with one rail down and her helm hard over, headed for the opposite side of the river.

"Only one white man in her! But she's packed with black ones like a slaver," Seymour said excitedly. "It's either some agent carrying out a private spec in contraband—or my namesake. Fling some oil into your furnace, Samson. We must overhaul her."

"That won't be easy," said Mulgrave. "She's a wood-burner steaming three feet to our two. We can head him off, however. Hallo! you can't go up there without a permit. Slow down and wait for us, or we'll fire into you."

The thud of hard-pressed engines, gurgle of water under shearing bows, and the whirring of two screws broke sharply through the silence that followed. The craft were now crossing the wide stream obliquely towards the opposite bank, but though their courses converged the Government vessel lay between the other and the forbidden territory.

"He's a plucky rascal, whoever he is," Mulgrave observed as the distance between them rapidly lessened.

"He can't get past us before he rams the mangroves, and I'm reluctant to fire upon a white man. Even if I wasn't, one has to be judicious, remembering how a certain rogue came out to get shot at and bleed the administration for it. Still, we'll send him a warning. Try to hit that launch's funnel, Sergeant Ilamba."

A thin red flash blazed across the bulwark, and Mulgrave was almost surprised when a metallic tinkle answered it, while at a word from Seymour half-a-dozen black Yoruba soldiers squatted with right heel under them and their rifle barrels resting on the rail. He swung the little machine gun on its pivot, and, staring through the slot in its shield, saw first a red wisp of flame and then the dark wall of foliage flying towards him.

"We're running full tilt for the mangroves, sir," he said. "The other fellow shows no sign of stopping, but he can't cross our bows without a collision. He's altering his helm a little."

"Watch him. We want him unhurt if possible, but get him we must," the answer came back from the stern. "Often six feet of water among the roots—perhaps he knows a passage through," and the black soldiers fidgeted while, lighted intermittently by the flickering glare, the low hull of the flying craft loomed up abeam.

"We're beating him," cried Seymour, and a glance showed Mulgrave that the fiery trail had dropped back abreast of their quarter. "Must be looking for a channel. Keep her going until we've cut him off from this shore; then if he won't pull up I can fire."

The helmsman stared forward and saw a black mass of withes and branches hanging, as it were, solidly over them. Seymour stooped to feel if the gun gear was clear, and when, at a shout from one of the soldiers, he lifted his head again the stranger was no longer abreast of the quarter, and a sharp clanging, followed by a floundering sound, came out of the blackness behind them. Then the lieutenant shouted, "Back her. He's going hard astern!"

The black engineer jumped for the reversing gear, but it was too late when the link swung over. The stranger's launch was evidently fitted with a heavy, coarse-pitch

propeller, which had already almost brought her up, but the little screw of the Government vessel failed as yet to check her way, and she forged ahead with the momentum of her coal, living freight, and armament.

"Hang on, all!" roared Mulgrave, wrenching on the tiller. "Lie flat down forward. We're going right into the forest like a battering-ram."

A blow from a drooping branch stretched Seymour flat upon the deck beside his gun; a barefooted black sergeant fell heavily upon him, driving his rifle-butt with violence into his master's ribs. Then there followed a heavy crash, and Mulgrave, loosing the tiller, sat down with a bang, while slimy withes and soft white stems groaned, ripped, and crackled under the impact. Next the launch listed over, and lay wedged fast, immovable, with one rail just level with the muddy water, and there was a deafening roar of steam when Samson stopped his engines. Mulgrave was the first to recover, and glancing about him bewilderedly, caught a last glimpse of a flickering radiance that vanished under the branches.

Presently, when Samson, opening the fire-door, checked the rush of steam, he said, "We can do nothing until the flood tide makes, unless it's scald the decks before the mangrove crawlers wake up and eat us. Anybody hurt forward, Seymour?"

"No, sir," was the answer, "unless it's me. The heaviest men in the company have stamped upon my anatomy. Private Koffee has dropped his rifle in and the rail is broken, but that seems about all the damage."

"That's a clever rogue," said Mulgrave, when he had made a rough survey. "Confound him—he almost deserves to get away, but there's paint scratched off by the fathom, and considering how the auditors growl about our indents it will cost me a month's pay to put this craft straight again. I'd give it all gladly to know who he really is, and we'll probably do so by and by if Messrs. Shotille and Okambo persist in their present attitude."

Meantime, Clarence Markham, for it was he who, remembering the accident to the mail boat, had run the blockade, after calling out his coloured assistant from behind the piled-up billets, laughed softly to himself as

his launch raced on up river. It was a merciful release from a heavy strain, for with so much at stake he would have stopped for nothing. "The Lord not give them Government fellow sense enough," observed the negro, showing his splendid teeth in an answering grin.

It was late on a sweltering afternoon when Clarence ran his steamer alongside the landing at Warrimba, and Legh, who met him in the compound, noted that his eyes were heavy and that he held himself erect with difficulty. Several days and nights of intense vigilance such as his would have left their mark upon most men, even in a much healthier climate than that of Western Africa.

He asked but one question, "Have I come in time?" and his heart leapt within him as Legh answered, "I almost venture to hope so."

"It's good news," said Clarence, steadying himself, then turned towards the house, saying, "Ice in a deal box wrapped in blankets in after compartment. Medicine on top of it. Send your boys—I could hardly see the locker."

He dropped into a chair on the verandah, and struggled against his weariness, but the fatigue was too much for him, and while forest and river grew indistinct he was conscious only of one fact that meant so much to him. He had come in time, and Florence lived.

Some minutes afterwards Johnston stooped over his chair, saying, "A wonderful journey! The man must be made of steel. Energy is a great gift, but it is not granted to everybody. Fast asleep, poor fellow, and we must make him comfortable. Help me to let the back down, Marian, and bring the mosquito net."

Johnston had hardly adjusted lounge and net when, followed by a negro carrying a heavy box, Legh ascended the stairway.

"I want Mrs. Johnston at once. There's not a moment to lose, but I think we shall beat the fever now," he said.

## XVI

### IN THE BALANCE

When Clarence opened his eyes again the swamps behind Warrimba were steaming, and a vault of star-gemmed indigo hung over the station. Missionary Johnston stood beside his chair gently shaking him, and the tired man lifting his head said sleepily, "More steam, you loafer—more steam."

The good missionary shook him again as he said, "I'm sorry to disturb you, but you are in Africa, and will catch fever if you sleep there. I thought I should never waken you, but you must come into the house."

"Is Miss Ellory still in danger?" asked Clarence, rising as he spoke, more dazed than refreshed by very brief slumber, and the missionary answered soothingly, "As yet I have nothing definite to tell you. Hilary is a clever man, and he hopes for the best. Everything has been tried, including the ice bath, and the atmospheric temperature has mercifully fallen several degrees."

"That is the way the doctors talk at home," and Clarence turned almost savagely upon the speaker. "You have some opinion. For Heaven's sake, man, tell me exactly what you think."

"I only hope," was the answer. "It was a last chance and a heavy risk, but she survived the shock, and now everything depends upon healing sleep. We cannot have two patients on our hands, and you must come in."

Clarence tried to obey him, but he could not rest, and afterwards, in spite of his hosts' protests, dragged himself up and down the compound in a state of tense suspense, returning at intervals to ask Johnston if he had any news. The building was dark and silent; the remnant of the sable flock slept soundly in the huts behind the bananas, but Clarence could see one faint glimmer of light, showing where Mrs. Johnston and Legh watched over the flickering life of the sufferer. He envied the missionary's medical skill as he waited

for tidings, powerless to help, the hardest task of all for a man of action, and when he crept up to the verandah, listening for what he hardly knew, the creak of timber shrinking under change of temperature and the "crick-crick" of a boring insect nearly maddened him. At last somebody called him softly, and he found Legh waiting in the bare living-hall.

"I have good news. She is asleep," he said. "If all goes well there will be no immediate danger by to-morrow."

"Thank God!" said Clarence, and Johnston coughed before he answered, "Amen!"

"You have done your part," said Legh. "Such a journey has never been made on these rivers, and how you got through the blockade I won't ask you now. But you look exhausted. Take this draught, and get the rest you need as soon as possible."

Clarence swallowed it at a gulp, and Legh went out, but Johnston's fondness for creature comforts made him considerate, for he said, "You ate nothing when you came in, and you must be hungry. I don't believe in starving people, and dare say I could do with a little sustenance myself, now the worst is passed. We have none of us had much appetite the last day or two."

"You were anxious about her?" and the missionary made a great advance in Clarence's estimation; while Johnston gulped down something in his throat before he answered, "Of course! Florence is a good girl, and I'm as fond of her as my own daughter—even if I haven't one. Gentleness is a great virtue in a woman, because a man grows tired of being told continually what he ought to do. No, I don't mean that exactly, but I'm too pleased to talk quite lucidly."

The supper which Johnston foraged for was, if served in primitive fashion, not a frugal one, and when it was over Clarence, who sat nearly asleep, found it hard to repress a chuckle as he watched the worthy missionary, who perhaps considered him wholly so, carefully replace what was left of the viands. He also fancied he overheard the latter murmur, "Marian can say what she likes to-morrow—but it's a very ungrateful heart that never

rejoices, and it's not every day we have so much to be thankful for."

"I quite agree with you." Clarence could not master the mischievous impulse. "You have also a comfortable idea of rejoicing," and his host, who seemed startled at first, smiled with a roguish air that reminded the spectator of an urchin caught at an unlawful frolic.

"You must not deduce too much," he said. "It is trying to have always to pose, as it were, on a pedestal. Now, I'm sometimes thankful I'm neither a hero nor a camel—only a man who objects to being turned into either against his will. There is a sad lack of common sense in this world, but I can't see why anybody should starve himself when it really isn't necessary. There are people who disagree with me. But what was it the immortal Plato said——"

"You are perfectly right," said Markham. "Never mind Plato. Confess you have forgotten whether it was he or—the other fellow. If we could help it we would never send half-fed men into action, and I dare say yours is a tougher battle. But it's getting late, and as I'm not going to disturb anybody please let me stay where I am until morning."

Several days passed, and Markham's launch still lay at Warrimba, while its owner, making what excuses he could, hung about the station waiting for news of the patient's progress, much to Mrs. Johnston's disgust. He had also trouble to prevent his half-tamed followers illegally collecting small sundries and assaulting the sable flock. One morning, when her indignation mastered her at the sight of the launch, she said to her husband, "Has it ever struck you that there is only one reason why Florence's health should be of any importance to a self-styled Government officer? Have you even asked yourself why that man is idling his time away here?"

Then the Reverend Peter Johnston, who was a lover of peace and scented trouble, shrugged his shoulders as he answered, "I was not born a genius—but I am not quite a fool."

If Mrs. Johnston had filled any other position she would have stamped her foot from sheer vexation at

this admission. As it was, her look boded ill for her husband's tranquillity, and that worthy groaned inwardly when she continued, "And do you not consider it your manifest duty to prevent it?"

"Prevent what?—you must speak more plainly, my dear," was his answer, and the lady favoured him with a scornful glance.

"It is hardly a dignified course to take refuge under an assumed stupidity. You understand, perfectly. Is it not your duty to prevent him insidiously estranging Florence's affections from the man who has won them so worthily?"

"Are you not progressing too fast?" asked Johnston. "It is only a short time since you were—may I say exasperated—because she had declined them."

"Peter," said his spouse sternly, "I often wonder whether you are so obtuse in some matters as you appear to be. The girl is young, inclined to be romantic and impressionable, but once that man is out of the way her good sense and recognition of what is due to her profession would incline her towards Hilary. Therefore, I want you—and there are sufficient legitimate excuses—to send him away. Suppose"—and Mrs. Johnston seemed to consider for a few moments—"suppose I told you he was not what you suppose him. Why does he never wear uniform, and what are all those savage porters for?"

The easy-going missionary had shown signs of revolt of late, and, as he told Markham, had grown fond of Florence—perhaps because she differed in many ways from his wife. So, pointing towards Clarence, who came out of the forest with a bunch of lilies in his hand just then, he answered, "I would at once say, not that I didn't believe you, but that you were mistaken. Any one with eyes can see that he is not only a soldier, but a man of good training as well. In fact, we have had long talks together, and I find he knows nearly as much, even of the Classics, as I do myself, while he is certainly sensible, because in many points his views coincide with mine."

Mrs. Johnston saw she must wait for definite proof of her assertion. She had small confidence in Smithers, and,

as her husband pointed out, there was the evidence of their own senses, while some officers required a good many hammock boys. Still, she could not refrain from answering with a tinge of sarcasm, "That, of course, is convincing testimony to his mental abilities."

Clarence was near the foot of the stairway now, and missionary Legh, who came out, beckoned him, saying, "I think we can grant your request to see Miss Ellory at last, especially after your exertions on her behalf. Indeed, she asked for you, but you must speak very quietly."

Clarence followed Mrs. Johnston, who had several times protested against this favour being shown him, with ludicrous caution, stepping on his toes until she drew apart a reed screen on the opposite side of the verandah, over which hung broad projecting eaves. Then, had his affection been the offering of a fickle nature, or born only of the desire of the eyes, it would suddenly have died. As it was, he halted chilled all through. He had once helped to lighten an invalid sister's leisure, but her very paleness heightened her beauty, as did the dainty surroundings. With Florence it was different, and Clarence shuddered as he saw the closely shorn head above the heavy roll of coarse brown blanket. The wavy hair he remembered had gone, the comely face had shrunken to a mere mask of skin like parchment, with the cheek-bones showing through, while the lips that once were ripe and crimson parted from the white teeth, blackened and cracked. The shapeless roll of blankets lay on a portable canvas stretcher, and there was only a bare timber wall, badly mildewed, behind it.

It was as well he had a moment to recover himself in before the sunken eyes were turned upon him, for by that time Clarence had passed the test. His own were hazy with pity when he met them, and confused emotions, of which indignation formed one, threatened to choke him. Thus it happened that while Mrs. Johnston seated herself at the further end of the screened-off verandah, it was Florence who spoke first.

"It was very kind of you to come and see me. I have been very ill—but once or twice I remembered you," she said.

Clarence drew a chair close beside the stretcher, spread the stainless scented blossoms broadcast across the coarse wrappings, and when she added, "You see I cannot welcome you as I would like to," placed his hand over the fragile bloodless one which lay white as the lilies on the edge of the canvas.

"I cannot tell you how sorry I am, Florence—but I expected to find you looking even more ill," he said with a desperate attempt at cheerfulness. "There are distinct signs of convalescence already—people get over the fever quickly, don't they?"

Florence noticed the direct use of her baptismal name, and did not resent it.

To both there had been a revelation while she lay under the shadow. Fears, hopes, and heart-searchings had crystallised into one incontrovertible fact with great potentialities for joy or sorrow, and now, when the shadow had barely lifted and might roll down again, there was for a time an end of ceremony between them. She also noticed a spasmodic movement of the man's lips under his moustache, and, understanding it, was sorry, not that he should pity her, but with an instinctive feminine shrinking from being seen by him shorn of all comeliness.

"You mean it out of kindness—but you are trying to deceive me," she said, with a faint, nervous smile. "You know I am not a cheerful spectacle."

"But you are getting better. You feel that yourself, don't you? You must get better," and there was a look of tense anxiety in the speaker's face which tempted the girl to ask half-shyly, "Why?"

"Because I want you to. Everybody wants you to," and Clarence grew confused. "The Reverend Johnston was in a state of delirious triumph the night you passed the crisis. As to what you said—I would sooner see you looking as if you had beaten the fever than anything else in the world, you know. But you are really getting better?"

"I believe so," and the long lashes covered Florence's eyes. "As everybody desires it, I suppose I must try to do so, but when one first escapes the fever one hardly wants to get better—especially in Africa."

Clarence looked startled. He was a vigorous, sanguine man, immune as yet from the pessimistic lassitude the climate induces. Neither did he know that many a racked sufferer sinking at last into the languor which follows delirium shrinks from taking up the heavy burden of existence in that land again.

"I don't understand. Whatever could you have been thinking of to make you feel that?" he said.

"When the fancies came upon me I thought I was in England," Florence answered wistfully. "Not the crowded town we lived in, but a pleasant valley where once when I was ill I spent a few weeks resting in an old-fashioned garden. It sloped down to a river, hills with yellow gorse on them ran up behind it, and I could hear cool water frothing over a hidden fall. But all this was fancy, and I am tiring you."

"No," said Clarence eagerly. "I know just such a place. I am tiring you. You ought not to talk. It seemed cruel, however, to check you."

"I am allowed to speak; it does me good," Florence continued, finding, because her mental faculties were feeble still, a childish pleasure in the recollection. "There was hay in one sloping meadow, and when it grew deliciously cool as the sun went down all the people I ever cared for seemed to come out of the shadows and talk to me."

"Was I there?" asked Markham ingenuously, and Florence, smiling, disregarded his question. "Of course, it was a hallucination, though it repeated itself continually, and when I wakened in Africa I wanted to sleep again. Then I longed for just one actual glance of that dream-England. I should have been content with the memory, for I know it is probable few of us will ever return any more. It is a relief to talk, even doleful nonsense; there are so many gloomy fancies which follow the fever. Tell me something cheerful. It is the sickness which has made me morbid!"

Clarence kept a tight hand upon himself. This was no time for direct love-making, and he felt that just then there was no need for it. Perhaps because the king of terrors had scarcely passed the one it seemed as

if a bond of mutual dependence had been silently knit between them. So, though he longed to make a different answer, he said gravely, "It is curious, but I know the place. I am usually a failure as a prophet, but I think you will once more rest in that garden some day, and commence life with new hope again. All the useful work in this world is not done by missionaries."

"I know," and Florence looked troubled. "But this is my chosen task, and I could never abandon it. It is a hard one sometimes, but then nothing worth while is easy; don't you think so?"

Clarence had no opportunity of airing his somewhat optimistic views, for Mrs. Johnston signalled to him, and he rose, saying, "I must return to mine in the meantime, but will not say good-bye, for I shall come back to see you whenever I can. And you must try to make a very speedy recovery."

He could say no more, for Mrs. Johnston beckoned impatiently, and when he went out Florence fondled the flowers he had brought her, while the man said to himself, "I shall tell her as soon as ever she is strong enough. How dare any one send her out to suffer in this ghastly country! Longing for a glance of the dream-England!—she shall have it soon if we are both of us living."

He boarded the launch to arrange for a prompt departure, and when at last he had collected his Krooboys, and the boiler-fire was burning well, strolled back towards the station. Mrs. Johnston was seated in the lengthening shadow of a mighty cottonwood, with fragments of embroidery scattered about her, but as she seldom wasted precious moments over such trifles it was possible she had arranged the scene for his benefit.

"I envy men of your profession your leisure," she said, with a subtle emphasis on the word profession which caused Clarence to look up sharply. "Here is an opportunity for spending part of it profitably. I should be glad if you will wind this skein of silk for me."

Clarence was not fond of Mrs. Johnston. Indeed, he was not quite certain that he was not even a little afraid of her, but he returned a conventional answer, and

leaning against one of the huge angular buttresses of living wood held out his hands meekly, adding, "It is not always wise to judge too hastily, and I wonder if you will believe me when I say that until the last few days I have scarcely had an hour's leisure since I landed in Africa. The borrowed tunic I arrived in did not indicate my profession."

Mrs. Johnston's smile was a grim one as she answered, "The observation is not altogether new, but I admit its correctness in the present case. As to the question which followed it—are you anxious for a complimentary reference to your energy, or, to take up your challenge, is there any reason why, when you make a statement, I should not believe you?"

Clarence, who did not answer, grew uncomfortable, and decided that his hostess possessed a distinctly unpleasant sense of humour. Still, he fancied that if she had any reason to suspect his connection with the enterprising commercial firm she would not have received him at Warrimba, and again he inwardly anathematised the coil circumstances had woven about him. Then, to change the subject and because he longed for further assurance, he said, "You are too keen for me, madame. I was shocked to see so great a change in Miss Ellory, but I hope you agree with missionary Legh's opinion that she is on the fair way to recovery."

This was Mrs. Johnston's opportunity, and she did not miss it. "Life is always uncertain in this country, but there is every reason to believe so. It has been an anxious time—we could not spare her. She has much to do for Warrimba in the future. It is in her power to enhance its prosperity."

Clarence dared not reply that he hoped the station would soon be deprived of Florence's assistance, but he did say, "One would hardly fancy that, however well she could teach, Miss Ellory possessed the qualities necessary to take a leading part in the direction of a place like this!"

"And, according to your opinion, what are they?"

Clarence blamed himself afterwards for answering without reflection, "An even judgment, absence of sensibility,

and a commanding disposition. They are all useful qualities, but not the ones which make a young woman lovable; and Miss Ellory——"

He stopped abruptly, conscious of a blunder, but his hostess answered, "You are right in a measure, and you are wrong. Enthusiasm also counts for much, and Florence is devoted to her work. It would, I think, break her heart if she were forced to relinquish it."

The shaft went home, but the lady followed it with another: "There is a fascination about this task, and those once called very seldom forsake it. Even if they do a punishment would seem to follow their faithlessness, and they bitterly regret it. I know definite cases. One of our own teachers, for instance, married a trader who was, somewhat strange to say, kind to her, but she told a trusted friend before she died that she found, too late, she could never wholly escape from the shame of her desertion."

"But," and Clarence found it hard to conceal his indignation, "you would not condemn any young Englishwoman to drag out all her life alone in this land of sickness and horror!"

"You are considering the question from a wholly mistaken standpoint. It would be a great thing to do so, even if it were all loneliness and gloom, but in this also you are wrong. We do not demand celibacy from our teachers, and the influence of a married woman far surpasses that of a single one."

"Do you mean that Miss Ellory—for instance—will marry one of your missionaries?" and Mrs. Johnston smiled as she answered, "It is certainly possible."

Markham's poor attempt at indifference was painfully transparent to the keen eyes fixed upon him, and the speaker continued pitilessly, with a smile which was not expressive of benevolence, "The question is perhaps one which you have no right to ask nor I to answer, and you should know that a lady does not parade her affections. Still, we should not be surprised if such a thing did happen, and because it would be to the benefit of Warrimba we would not be sorry."

The skein was wound at last, and Markham was

glad. "Confound Warrimba!" he said fervently when he boarded his launch and flung himself down on a locker to consider the position. It was not encouraging. Florence herself had confirmed the elder lady's statement that it would be a wrench to her to leave the mission service, and he gathered from the latter's conversation that there was at least an understanding between her and the missionary. Nevertheless, he could not reconcile this with an indefinite something in Florence's manner towards himself, and longed for a fitting opportunity of putting his fate to the test. He could not do so yet without betraying his trust, and Florence was in no fit state to make a momentous decision.

He steamed away as darkness fell, and about this time Florence, growing feverish again with the approach of night, said in answer to Legh's question, "Each attack is weaker, and I am glad my strength is coming back. I do not require attention, and you have worn yourself out watching me."

Legh felt that he would have worn himself to a shadow to win her gratitude, and perhaps few in his position would have returned the same answer, but, as Mrs. Johnston once said, he was one in a thousand. "We are rewarded, but there is somebody else who helped us greatly. Mr. Seaton brought the ice and medicine we were powerless without, and ran the gauntlet of Okambo's war boys doing it."

Florence insisting, he told what he knew of Markham's journey, and when he retired, opening a book, she lifted out a lily already fading between its pages. "He never told me. Nobody told me—except the one man who might have kept silence," she said. "He is a very good man." Then she closed the book and lay still, shrinking from the future, until, saying with a sigh, "I must wait until I have strength to think—but he risked his life for me," she sank into troubled sleep.

## XVII

### DIAMOND CUT DIAMOND

THE procedure of some of the trading agents who exploit the western littoral of the Dark Continent would, it is possible, not always win the approval of either Government authorities or their employers at home. But the former cannot be everywhere at once, and, so long as the profits are high enough, the latter do not invariably trouble to ascertain just how they are arrived at. Therefore, because the law of supply and demand is stronger than ordinances prohibiting the sale of over—or more often under-proof gin, rifles always and other arms in times of disaffection, besides adulterated oil and shells to mix with palm kernels, there were one or two men on the rivers whose relations with the bush traders were not above suspicion, and for that reason could traverse waterways nobody else dare venture upon.

Agent Smithers was one, and understanding the virtues of reticence he contented himself with returning a satisfactory if cunningly doctored balance sheet and pocketing his commission. He was by no means a courageous man, but, like others of his species, now and then ran risks because avarice was stronger than fear. So it came about that one evening when there were rejoicings in Mahogany Camp he steamed up a blockaded river in a dilapidated launch, considering a scheme which promised to neutralise the efforts of the timber cutters. He had with him a Krooboy whom Cummings had chastised with conscientious thoroughness for petty larceny, in consequence of which the black man hated both the engineer and his comrades.

Markham, however, knew nothing about this, but sat elated with good news over a small calabash of sour palm-wine in his lighted tent, while Lyle, who beamed with satisfaction, said, "It's simply great. Somebody might have lifted a mahogany log off my shoulders. The concession should be safe at last—safe as houses; and I'm commencing to admire Shotille. His brigands smashed up a band of Okambo's picked men on the edge of the

mangrove country, or said they did, and I'm inclined to believe it from the things they brought back with them. The other side wouldn't have left good weapons if they hadn't been in a hurry."

"You can never believe a nigger, especially a missionary nigger," interposed Cummings. "You needn't get savage, Clarence. I've told you the trick the converted blacksmith played off on me. Still, I fancy this is true, and I know Okambo's trying to make peace, because I saw his herald. But we won't drink Shotille's health until we're through with the slippery rascal. Here's a better one—friends who love us across the sea. I should like to point out there's about two spoonfuls each."

"So we observe," said Lyle, regarding the calabash. "I am, however, wondering where the rest of it went to."

It was duly honoured, and the Colonial's eyes brightened as, staring into the blue smoke of a treasured cigar, he saw again in fancy Eveline Lonsdale glancing back towards him over her shoulder, a vision of all that seemed desirable in womanhood, relieved against a background of russet and crimson in Roughton Wood.

"I wonder when we'll see the old land again," he said. "Oh yes, in spite of the 'Trespassers will be prosecuted,' it's a country to yearn for when one has stewed in Africa. Clarence, after what we have heard, it seems very close to-night, and I'm longing to breathe the clean coolness that comes down at sunset from the Thornton moors. Well, if nothing happens we'll be steaming out over the Silver bar, homeward bound, before six months are over."

Cummings nodded several times before he said, "You're praising the country when you mean the people, or one of them in particular. Being young and guileless, Lyle forgets there's safety in numbers. Now for ten long years I've been looking for a widow with money, and I've found several."

Lyle chuckled, and Clarence frowned, for the engineer's reminiscences were interminable, and not always edifying, but the narrator continued, "One she lived in Chile, and would have me up at sunrise and into the cathedral—it's usually a good sign when they're anxious about your regeneration. Padre Maccario was also a good old soul, and if

it hadn't been for a guitar that got broken on a cousin's head I might have settled there. Another she lived in Ulster, where I stood by the replating of a steamer, and used to groan in the back row at a very grim kind of revival meetings. They're a mighty serious people yonder. Then an elder tried to tell me I didn't understand the beginning of a hydraulic riveter, and it took a lot to convince him. When I had done it, the widow had done with me."

"You jar upon one sometimes, Cummings, and we want to think over things quietly to-night," Clarence broke in. "The good news deserves it. If you're boiling over go out and sing to the niggers. They will probably enjoy it."

Cummings departed good-humouredly enough. He had, so he informed them, learned to appreciate a few good qualities possessed by both Clarence and Lyle, and by and by bursts of African merriment accompanied his performance, while the two men lay silent in the tent. It is dark soon after six the year round in that region. There was little to cause Lyle uneasiness, but Markham's case was different. He hoped to win Florence as well as set the mahogany concession on a secure footing, and the success of the latter left him little time in which to accomplish his wooing, even if there had not been, besides another difficulty, a powerful rival in the field. He, however, determined to make an early visit to Warrimba.

On the following night Smithers, who had left his launch hidden in a narrow creek sacred to the Ju-Ju, and was paddled up stream in a canoe, entered Shotille's stronghold unobserved by any except the watchers along the water front, who had learned discretion painfully, and was favoured with a private audience. He explained his visit in simple terms. Trees grew in that country which, sawn up, might perhaps be sold for a little in England. He was willing to pay for the privilege of cutting down a few, if Shotille did not ask too much.

It was a case of diamond cut diamond from the first. Smithers felt certain that the other white men had already purchased the right to cut that timber, and Shotille was aware that he did so. Smithers also knew that the man he dealt with would sell his word and honour gladly to the highest bidder, the oftener the better, and that his own

employers were both keen for new openings and held a long purse. Still, he was handicapped by the fact that of the pair Shotille alone could estimate his first success in arms at its correct value.

"Plenty ghosts live among them tree," said the African ruler, speaking English, though he had an interpreter present. "We not like to sell him, for fear them ghosts get mad and lib for raise too much shindy in my village."

Smithers winked deliberately as he answered, "Then why do you let the other fellows cut them down?" and Shotille, affecting surprise at the reference, at last appeared to recollect the matter, and replied that he had, out of sheer kindness, permitted one or two white men, who had given him a splendid present, to take away a strictly limited quantity.

"I really don't care whether I get the trees or not," Smithers said. "I'm in too much hurry too, but thought I would call and find out just what you wanted for them. I must have the whole forest or nothing."

Shotille was, however, shrewd enough to reason that if two different white men were willing to undertake a risky and arduous journey to secure his timber it must be of value, which Smithers of course guessed, but in doing so he had by no means fathomed the sable diplomatist's ingenuity. For two whole hours they bargained, sometimes through the interpreter, whom Shotille retained for a purpose not particularly apparent, more often in the quaint and vivid coast palaver. Then Shotille placed his signet to a document leasing Smithers the forest for a term of three years from the commencement of operations in return for a heavy payment in prohibited arms and gin. One launch-load then lying down stream was to be forthwith delivered, more within a few weeks, and the balance as it could be smuggled in. If the intervals between instalments were lengthy, it would invalidate the agreement.

Now the intrinsic value of any "Concession" from an African potentate depends upon both the character of the man who grants it and the ability of the holder to enforce his rights. One cannot always sue the former for breach of contract, and even when he dwells in territory supposed to be under British jurisdiction it would occasionally

require an army corps to enforce a court's decision. Still, a concession has generally a value among speculative financiers, and Smithers trusted to his wits to convert it into currency.

So he returned down river with the second document Shotille had sealed, leaving that worthy very well satisfied, while the trader, lounging at the helm of his launch, also congratulated himself upon his bargain. "Shotille daren't break faith with me when I know enough to turn a Protectorate expedition loose upon him, and as for the other fellows we'll either offer them a trifle or bluff them out," he said. "At the worst, we can stir in the patent mixture, and water the gin."

Smithers duly reached his factory, having passwords from both of the belligerents, and several canoe-loads of gin and arms were run up river, but when he presently spent a day in a little-known village, whose headman was covertly friendly with Okambo, he suffered from a fit of fury as he commenced to comprehend Shotille's ingenious game. The pair—cadaverous, hollow-faced white man, with greedy eyes and lank, nervous fingers, and cotton-swathed heathen—sat discussing the stagnation of trade and native politics in a stifling hut with a bottle of Benedictine on the rammed-earth couch between them. Smithers was not lavish by nature, but he had learned to apply the proverb about truth and wine, and knew that the black man who, cultivating a refined taste, drinks liqueur out of tumblers, is apt to forget the need for caution.

"You will be Shotille's man now," said the European, who, by exercising a severe self-denial worthy of a better cause, had retained full command of his wits. "Dropped your old friend Okambo overboard, eh, since Shotille smashed those fellows on Lalanga creek?"

The African, who could understand more English than he usually admitted when at long intervals the Government officers visited him, grinned significantly, and, slipping one hand inside his cotton robe, held out a collection of fantastic trifles, including several curious shells threaded on a string. "You savvy them thing?" he asked.

Smithers was sufficiently sober not to show his astonishment, though his eyes were eager. It was a talisman of

the highest order, such as he guessed could not have been produced in Shotille's dominions, for, the latter being a mere mushroom commercialist, his priesthood was of low degree.

"It's a big Ju-Ju. You got that from Okambo! Talking makes one thirsty," he said with assumed indifference. Then, because the tumbler would have furnished evidence of his unusual abstinence, he raised the bottle to his lips, while when the negro had done the same he grinned more broadly as he answered—

"Shotille one dam t'ief man. All them people dun get sick of him. Okambo Ju-Ju king. Okambo send to make peace palaver and buy all Shotille's second headman. Shotille savvy plenty. Lib for him village and t'ief all them thing he can, then lib for get out up river with plenty loaded canoe before Okambo come for smash him."

Smithers was staggered, but a few judicious questions placed the correctness of the negro's views almost beyond dispute. The sable inhabitants of that region had grown restive under the protracted uncertainty which crippled their trade, and because Shotille had only won one small action were, as usual in time of doubt, returning to their ancient allegiance. Shotille, it seemed, was aware of this, and only waiting to collect as much revenue and outstanding debts as possible before making a judicious retreat. Smithers, therefore, took leave of his host, who was already growing incoherent, and boarding his launch thrashed his sable fireman. He was boiling over with righteous indignation, and felt he must vent it upon somebody.

Next, as the little vessel panted on her way, he dipped his head into the river, as well as both arms to the shoulder, treated himself with a preparation of pot. bromide, and then said half-aloud, "The confounded rascal has got the first instalments of my gin, and even if that was watered freely it will make a big hole in the profits. Well, the timber will be Okambo's presently, and the sooner I open negotiations with him the better."

This was not the task a prudent man would have undertaken had he been able to avoid it, but Smithers had gathered sufficient information about the mahogany forest

to give him a fair idea of its value. He also knew he must obtain some asset of value to set against the cost of the goods already forwarded Shotille, or there might be trouble when he sent his next statements home. Smithers was skilled in the art of cooking a balance, but he had lost rather heavily, and could not create assets which would pass an audit out of nothing. He reached Okambo's headquarters safely, which was perhaps more than a company of Protectorate troops would have been able to do, but, because that personage aspired to sacerdotal and military power rather than commercial prosperity, was kept a week badly fed in a foul hut before being permitted to state his business. Neither was he allowed to enter the royal presence, and explained what he had come for to a sable official who refused all liquor.

"We do not want trees, but we want guns, the kind that split open and load in the middle," said the negro. "If enough are brought up the creeks before the moon is old we will give you the trees when we drive out Shotille. Okambo does not like white men, and those others stole a slave of his sacred to the Ju-Ju, so if they do not run away the Ju-Ju will doubtless settle with them. But Okambo knows you, and will not cut your throat if you send him good guns."

Smithers spent most of the day making the best bargain he could, and departed under cover of night in an evil humour, while when he eventually reached his factory he said to his assistant, "I have been plundered at both ends, and somebody has got to pay for it. How we are going to square things I don't quite know, and after I spent a month over the last statements the accountant sent a most insulting note. Anyway, it's lucky I bought up that Hamburg fellow's second-hand arsenal. He packed them away cleverly, and even Cowardine didn't suspect gun-barrels in dry goods bales. Start in to-morrow, and get this lot made up."

"They're different calibres, and we haven't cartridges to fit all the larger ones," said the other; and Smithers looked at him with ironical pity. "What does that matter so long as they'll slip into the chamber?" he said. "It's not often a nigger's gun will go off just when he wants

it, under any circumstances, and they won't expect too much."

"But mightn't some of the men who get the extra large guns insist on you showing them how to fire them?" persisted the assistant, and Smithers laughed as he answered, "It's by no means certain I shall go up again until the trouble's over, and, as I said, they're tolerably used to guns that won't go off. Still, they'll make it warm for those white pirates if they get in with the matchet. I wonder what our directors would say if they knew the tricks their covetousness forced me into. It's well one doesn't expect much gratitude in this world, anyway!"

## XVIII

### MARKHAM CARRIES OVER

It was a depressing day of the third week in December when Northop Markham leaned somewhat heavily on a desk beside his office window, scrutinising the sheet his book-keeper unrolled before him with inward dismay. He knew from experience that business and other troubles staved off hitherto have a way of overtaking their victim in the season which is to many rather a time of sadness than festivity. The book-keeper had been in Markham's service fifteen years, but he was manifestly nervous, for it is a trying task to bring one's employer mathematical proof that he is near the end of his commercial career. He was also sorry for Markham, who had been a good master, as well as for himself, knowing that in these days of pitiless competition it is by no means easy for the discharged employee of a bankrupt firm to find a new opening to earn his daily bread. Therefore the man of figures cleared his throat once or twice before he said—

"I have kept the state of affairs a secret from the rest of the staff so far as I could, sir, and am sorry the preliminary balance you asked for does not look better. The stock has been taken at highest current value, but you

will notice that the total liabilities exceed our rough estimate. I remained late all last week, hoping to find some mistake, but, after checking everything, could not reduce the resulting deficit."

Markham only nodded as he followed the pointing finger, and if the clerk had expected any sign of consternation he was disappointed, for the merchant's face remained inscrutable.

"It is clearly worked out, and does you credit, Thompson," he said. "The sum realised by the sale of the mahogany is reassuring, but I hardly fancied the bank account so heavily overdrawn. All these invoices, etc., are due. Which are the most pressing?"

"Nearly ten thousand pounds due salt, cloth, and hardware makers, which should have been paid already, but I told Williams to delay a little. Then there are salaries, rents, storage, etc., as per Schedule B, and another heavy list C."

"You did wrong," said Markham. "Send them cheques to-day. Pay the others off punctually."

"But the overdraft, sir? There will be a larger sum due in January. The bank will hardly accept oil as a security considering there is practically no demand for it, and with money tight the result would be——"

"Well?" said Markham, with a trace of very grim amusement in his eyes, and Thompson repeated, "The result would be——"

"Something very like disaster," said Markham with perfect composure, and while the other stared at him added, "You were to have been married next month, Thompson."

"Yes, sir," said the clerk with evident hesitation. "I have saved a little, but now I fear——"

"You may have to put it off," and Markham swung round his swivel chair so that he could look out of the window. Thompson said nothing, knowing his master's moods, and, though he tingled with anxiety, also looked out through the grimy panes, because for the moment there was nothing else he could do. Fog thickened by smoke hung heavily over the roofs, which were streaked by soot-flecked snow, but the traffic was thicker than ever

in the slush below. The myriad figures in the throng seemed to move more briskly than usual, every car that went clanging past the end of the street bore a heavy load of passengers cumbered with multifarious purchases, and close-packed groups blocked the pavement where a glare of light beat out from the decorated shops. There was a suggestion of cheerful expectancy in the bustle quite out of keeping with the sensations of the two spectators. One of them knew that very shortly he might have to tramp round those dingy buildings in a heart-sickening search for work which could not be found, instead of entering into the estate which, blissful or otherwise, he had been denying himself during several years to attain to.

The merchant's bearing was, however, still serene, and wheeling his chair round he said, "Where is the list of possible reductions I asked for?"

"Here, sir," said Thompson. "We could not cut down working expenses further without touching the coast staffs' salaries."

"H'm!" said Markham, dashing his pen through several of the items. "Thirty pounds off your own pay—are you getting modest, Thompson, and how about your furnishing? That stands good; the factory salaries also. Pay those in full—the poor devils earn them. As to getting married—that is always a serious question, Thompson, but I wouldn't despair just yet if I were you."

The clerk looked at his master, who smiled, and, though it was only for a moment, felt comforted. He knew that Northop Markham was a very hard man to beat, and even though carefully-checked figures seemed to prove his defeat, began to cherish a faint hope that his employer's daring genius might yet turn it into victory.

"Now I suppose I must take you into my confidence," said Markham. "You are a good book-keeper, Thompson, but hardly likely to be anything more. You lack boldness of conception, and I'm not sorry—because I would not care to lose you. This is only a preliminary balance in experimental instead of formal shape, and you estimate all assets at current value. Perfectly correct so far as it goes, and it shows that the firm is tottering. But see here—that makes a difference, doesn't it?"

He worked out a hasty sum, altered the total of the assets, and Thompson said, "But you are taking the oil and kernels which nobody will buy now at normal value, sir."

"Just so," said Markham, with a curious laugh. "They will presently go back to it—though it is quite possible a good many timid people don't think so. Most industries using oil are in a crippled state this year—they won't always remain in that condition. Nobody bought oil, and my competitors have cabled their African agents to secure, where possible, other produce. Well, can't you see that the first revival of demand will swallow existing supplies, and, as the bushmen have been collecting rubber and dye-woods instead, there may even be an oil famine? We will not realise just now at a heavy sacrifice."

"But how shall we meet our liabilities in the meantime, sir?" asked Thompson, in a state of wonder; and Markham answered, "By getting the bank to carry me over. They would hardly take oil as a security to-day! —I don't intend to ask them. I see you have an erroneous idea of the mahogany concession's value. Telephone manager Nelson I'm coming across to see him."

It was not long before Markham sat in the bank manager's private office, speaking with a quiet assurance which concealed his torturing anxiety. He had hitherto visited it as an honoured customer, and now, for the first time, came as a supplicant, knowing that most momentous issues hung upon the autocrat's decision. The latter did not look in the least like an autocrat. He was a young man for the position he capably filled, with a smooth-shaven, ruddy face, but his mind was busy as he listened, drumming upon the table now and then with a paper-knife. He also wondered at the speaker's composure. Many of the men who visited him did so in a state of visible trepidation or even abject fear, for his post not infrequently resembled that of a jury foreman in a murder case; but Markham appeared to take his agreement to a risky scheme for granted, ignoring the possibility that he might receive what would be commercially a death sentence.

"There is no use denying that your account—has been —a valuable one," said the financier thoughtfully. "But your present request almost surprises me. We are overloaded with securities difficult to market, and one could hardly give palm oil away. Frankly, if it was any other man, I should be inclined to consider that he was jesting. You ask me to finance you on the strength of your statement that prices will improve and this scrawl in indifferent English and what I presume is Arabic, relating to certain uncut mahogany. My dear sir, can you picture my directors' face if I submitted either as a voucher? Too many people have been bitten over African concessions."

Markham neither begged nor stormed as a desperate man had done a few minutes earlier. He was equally desperate, but he answered drily, "Your directors give you a free hand, don't they? And my name should be a guarantee. Are you seeking a cheap excuse to refuse me?"

The man who held the power to ruin him by a word glanced at the speaker with a trace of amusement, and then sat silent, still fidgeting with the paper-knife, for more than a minute. Markham could hear the soft tread of footsteps on the matting outside, occasional low voices, and the ticking of the watch in his pocket, and though he waited nonchalantly, twelve months' feverish anxiety were compressed into that minute. Then the financier said—

"I was looking for an excuse to raise the interest. Of course, current rates won't cover this. It's a big risk, Markham, and I have been staking heavily of late. On your word of honour, do you consider that paper would justify me running it?"

"I do," said Markham quietly. "Owing to native troubles it may cost more than I anticipate to get the timber out, even loss of life, but it would only be a question of waiting, and the value is undoubtedly there."

"Then," and after scribbling something on a slip of paper which he handed across, the financier leaned back in his chair, "if you can stand the interest we'll honour your drafts to this amount. I can't make fifteen per cent. dividends without taking risks, but you have got to pay accordingly."

"I don't think you will be sorry," said Markham, "but I must have the full amount. Two-thirds of it is of no use to me."

This time the banker frowned, and drummed once more upon the table before he answered, "So be it. You are a very cool man, Markham, and under the circumstances I hardly think I should have lent anybody else a penny. But you'll do me the justice to remember that native potentate's signet had nothing to do with convincing me."

"What tempted you, then?" asked the merchant; and the banker looked at him with a faint twitching of his eyelids as he answered, "I'm of a gambling disposition, my rivals say, and, though our auditors might not consider either a marketable security, it was your calm assurance regarding future prices and the past history of Markham and Company."

The merchant went out from his presence with a great sigh of relief, and ploughed through the slush as though he trod on air. He was safe for a time, and there would be developments before it elapsed. When he re-entered his office he summoned the book-keeper, saying, "I have arranged with the bank to honour our drafts. Now take this paper and credit Clarence Markham, Lyle, and Cummings *pro rata* with the amount stated for value received. Next enter as a sale to them oil in store, and to arrive, at a corresponding value. That will make them safe—before repayment of the loan falls due. By the way, I hope this will enable you and the others to enjoy the coming holiday. It's really your due for working long hours lately."

The sincerity of Thompson's thanks equalled his surprise, and his face beamed when he afterwards escorted a plainly-attired girl with a shrewd pink and white face into a crowded café where the tariff usually exceeded the limits of his purse. Markham, who was no respecter of persons, drew some of his best assistants from the lower walks of life, and Thompson had an invalid mother dependent upon him.

The girl settled herself in a cushioned corner with a little smile of content, saying, "This is nice, Jack, and something good must have happened, but isn't it awfully

extravagant? Please don't be mysterious. Tell me all about it, quick."

Thompson whispered something in his companion's ear, which immediately grew pink, and as the carmine deepened in her cheeks a man at an adjacent table favoured her with a languid glance of approval which caused the book-keeper's fingers to clench upon a knife-handle. Then she said shyly, "I am glad, for your sake, Jack. You were almost despairing a few days ago."

"That wasn't strange," said the man. "It is very hard to find a berth nowadays, and you had given notice to leave your place, Nellie. For a month I hardly dare picture what might happen, and there was the house taken, and the furniture to be paid for."

"But you only talked nonsense instead of explaining things," said Nellie. "Isn't Mr. Markham really going to fail?" and the man banged his hat down recklessly.

"Fail? not he—I ought to have known better. Mr. Markham is a regular Napoleon, Nellie, and he has got some good people under him. I don't think anything would overwhelm him."

The girl laughed, a merry peal of laughter, as she said, "Jack, you are a vain old thing—some day he will be making you a partner, and then it will be beyond my powers to hold you down at all. But what have you ordered?—a regular banquet! Jack, you are reckless to-day."

Thompson beamed once more as he opened a pocket-book, and the girl peeping in caught sight of certain heavy black letters on the crisp paper affected by the Bank of England. "That's Markham's Christmas present—even more than usual, and my salary runs on the same," he said. "Worth rejoicing over, eh, Nellie? And I know how they feed you at that confounded store. Markham's a gentleman. No grinding down of poor men under him, and I wonder if it would be out of place to say 'God bless him.' Now we're going to have a royal time these holidays, and don't ask any silly questions while I tell you all about it. Remember it's a great secret."

When the explanation was finished the girl, who listened eagerly and comprehended little except the compliments

her companion paid himself in passing, said, "He must be a very bold man, Jack, and if it wouldn't make you jealous I should positively like to hug him."

Then the pair feasted in high spirits, with laughter, blush, and jest, and more than one of the male loungers envied Thompson his pretty companion, who looked supremely happy. It was almost a pity Markham could not have seen them, but at that very time he was talking to his wife in his big and somewhat ponderously furnished dining-room.

"We really cannot retrench any more," the lady said. "I am almost penniless now, after paying the girls' dress-making bills, and people are beginning to ask already why they refuse so many invitations. I can't help wondering, Northop, whether it would not be better for us to shut this house up and go away to some place where we can live economically. Promiscuous hospitality is very expensive and so are the necessary servants, while we can't draw in here without proclaiming our secret to everybody. It is a gloomy Christmas, with this cloud hanging over us, and Clarence perhaps in actual danger."

Markham sighed, and there was weariness in his face as he answered, "I think you are right. Indeed, I had almost decided to recommend a visit to the little hill quinta in the Canaries. I have gained a respite, and feel almost certain that Clarence will help us to an ultimate triumph, but we must be very careful in the meantime, and that arrangement would suit me, for I may visit The Rivers, and would be already well on the way."

"Northop!" said the lady, with unmistakable traces of agitation. "You must not go back at your age to that horrible country. I could not risk both of you;" but the man answered gravely, "It may not be necessary, but you will remember the mahogany venture is our forlorn hope, and having borrowed money on the strength of it I must do my utmost. In any case, I will go with you to Grand Canary, for there will be no business demanding personal attention until the repayments are due, and you can live just as you like at Don Maccario's quinta. Let us hope better times will dawn for all of us before another Christmas comes."

## XIX

### THE WOMEN'S SHARE

It was Christmas Eve when Eveline Lonsdale, glowing from a brisk walk through the nipping air, entered what Hilda Markham called her studio. A half-finished canvas reposed upon an easel, but that was all which justified the name, and Miss Markham bent over a little table beside a sulky fire, while her sister Lucy lay curled up on the hearthrug beside her. Both Eveline and Hilda Markham dabbled in art, but now the latter nibbled a penholder and turned over the book before her with a puzzled air.

Hilda Markham was tall, and dark in colour of eyes and hair, a handsome young woman, most of her male friends said, but she did not appear to advantage as with wrinkled forehead and inky fingers she looked up when Eveline came in.

"Whatever are you doing to-day, of all days in the year?" said the latter, drawing a chair towards the fire and poking it vigorously, while as the light touched her face, which was ruddy with health and good humour, it formed a striking contrast to the troubled visage of her friend. It was the younger sister, who, idolising their brother, had not forgiven Eveline for a supposed blight to his affections, made answer.

"Hilda is trying to make six go into four, and leave something over for much-needed millinery. She is auditing the housekeeping book, and I need not say has so far been unsuccessful. All days are much the same to those who have no money, but Siss hoped she had saved a little. We wanted to find out how much before we answered a certain letter."

"But doesn't your mother manage that?" asked the visitor; and the painfully frank young person on the hearthrug answered, "No, Hilda keeps things straight, or tries to. Mother fusses, and preaches the economy we poor girls practise."

Eveline, who was a practical damsel, moved her chair

to the table, saying, "You look worried, Hilda. I am good at figures; let me help you. Oh yes, I see, baker, butcher, grocer, etc., total—you're ten shillings out, Hilda. Now, on the other side, so much your mother gave you. There ought to be seven pounds balance, and you have—let me see—four pounds and sixpence. Where has the rest of it gone to?"

"That," said Hilda, "is just what I can't tell you, though I have spent all afternoon trying to find out, until it has given me a splitting headache."

Eveline dropped the money into a little cash-box, closed the blotted book, and then gently brushed the hair back from Hilda's forehead. "You must not look at another figure to-day," she said. "Lucy, can't you get us some tea? Don't you hear your sister say she has a headache?"

"She always has when she takes up the account-book," answered Lucy. "I suppose that is one result of winning a first prize for mathematics."

"You have hardly touched yonder canvas since I was last here," said Eveline when she sipped her tea. "How are your studies progressing?" and Hilda tried to look indifferent as she answered, "They are not progressing at all—I cannot afford the fees. And I hardly think the canvas will ever be finished. We have neither time nor silver to waste on anything not absolutely necessary."

"Is it quite so bad?" asked Eveline, giving her friend's shoulder a sympathetic pat, while the cup she held in her left hand shook, and Lucy answered wrathfully, from the rug, "A good deal worse, but you won't make it better by spilling your tea down the back of my neck. Even blouses like this one cost money."

"I am sorry; not in the least for you, Lucy," said Eveline. "But couldn't you have let me help you, Hilda? It would have been such a privilege—almost a right, you know."

"No!" and the amateur artist sighed. "You are very kind, Eveline—but I simply couldn't let you. Besides, we are going to the Canaries, and by the time we get back again something fortunate may have happened. We are all depending on Clarence's efforts."

"What was the last news you had from him?" and Eveline's interest deceived Lucy Markham, who, fishing with some difficulty a crumpled letter out of her pocket, read extracts from it in a defiant fashion. At times Eveline smiled, and again her face grew serious as she listened, while Hilda, who had a suspicion of the truth, leaned back in her chair, watching the pair with traces of faint amusement.

"'All well, but getting thin. Provisions are scanty. I am doubtful if the nigger I entrust this letter to will ever get through to post it,'" quoted Lucy. "'The bushmen haven't made peace yet, and in the meantime nobody will grow anything. We have even run out of bananas, and the yams are rotten. In fact, the ingenuous Cummings says——'"

"You need not quote that," interposed Hilda. "It was written to father, and the said Cummings appears to be a distressfully outspoken man."

"We'll miss it, but he really is funny. You laughed over it more than I did," said Lucy, continuing, "'Drinking river-water, with as a treat sour palm-wine.' Fancy Clarence! And he was so horribly particular about everything at home. It is positively cruel—and I think some people have a great deal to answer for."

Eveline looked uneasy for a moment; then she laughed, saying, "I should like to prescribe that very diet for a good many modern young men. A few weeks of it would prove decidedly beneficial."

Lucy rose up indignantly from the rug. "I cannot understand you, Eveline. It isn't kind," she said. "Listen to this: 'Yesterday we had oil and mud fish only, and Cummings——'"

"Lucy!" said the elder sister warningly; and the other continued reading with a vindictive air, "'I was at the Warrimba mission in search of news.' He mentioned that place three times in his first letter, and from what he told mother a young woman who apparently embodies all the virtues and graces lives at Warrimba. You need not smile—she is not a black beauty."

Eveline laughed with ostensible enjoyment, but afterwards listened thoughtfully while Lucy concluded the

extracts. Being a discerning person, she surmised, though the fact was not stated, that the timber cutters suffered considerable hardship, and were not wholly free from danger.

"Where is the photograph he mentions?" she asked; and Lucy answered, "I lent it to Charlie Dane. He said he would return it at the Crosleys' celebrations, but now we are not going."

"Not going!" said Eveline. "Why is that?" and Hilda sighed as she answered, "It would necessitate new decorations, and we cannot afford them."

"It is too bad," said Eveline. "He dances so nicely, too. You need not pretend to be mystified; but is it really impossible?"

"Quite. Especially after that wretched balance. Of course, father would give us what we wanted in a moment if we asked him, but he has a hard fight of it, and we must help him, if only to prove that women can do their share!"

"It is cruel—and I may not help you!" said Eveline. "What is the use of the wretched money to me when I can never do what I most want with it! But I hear your mother coming. Lucy, when you get it, will you show me the photograph?"

"You can ask Charlie Dane for it," said Lucy, with a cold glance at the speaker.

Eveline laid her hand on the young girl's shoulder, and looked down on her gravely from her superior height. "I am fond of you, Lucy—why do you persist in being unfriendly? Dear me! must I tell you, you silly little thing, that on two points which appear to be sore ones you are utterly wrong?"

Before she departed that evening Eveline, watching for an opportunity, found Mrs. Markham alone. "I want to ask you a favour, Aunty," she said coaxingly. "The name suits you, and you have almost been a mother to me since I lost my own. It is Christmas time, too, you see."

"I will promise if it is not anything very dreadful," said the elder lady; and Eveline answered, "There are people to whom I should very much like to give a present, and they would like the present, but they are very touchy and might be vexed with me. They would, however,

accept it from you. Will you give it them instead of me?"

Mrs. Markham was thinking about something else, and she answered, "What very foolish people they must be! Of course I will."

"They are—though I'm surprised you think so," said Eveline. "One of them is Hilda, and the other Lucy. There; that is the whole conspiracy, and I want them particularly to support me at a certain approaching festivity. Now—and please remember all the benefits you have showered upon me—couldn't you give them the necessary decorations as a Christmas present?"

Mrs. Markham had learned several wholesome lessons during the earlier portion of her husband's career, and she kissed the conspirator, saying, "How dare you play this trick on me? My dear, it would be unkind as well as foolish to refuse you. We have been trying to hide all domestic worries from their father, and they may have to abandon any pleasures of the kind for ever shortly."

"I should try to hate you for life, Aunty, if you betray me," said Eveline, retreating while she was sure of her victory.

Mrs. Markham managed affairs with unusual diplomacy, for in due time her daughters, daintily arrayed, drove with Eveline Lonsdale towards the scene of festivity. The ground rang hard as iron under the horses' hoofs, and Eveline, sitting near a window, could see the glittering crystals gemming a network of bare branches that arched the road, with a sheen of stars behind them burning frostily. She had of late studied several books of travel, and could not help contrasting that keen, invigorating atmosphere with the enervating steam of Africa.

The music was good, floor perfect, most of the assembly in good spirits, and Eveline enjoyed the first portion of the evening as most young women of cheerful temper and attractive presence, with no lack of attendants, would. Then the heel of one slipper gave way, wrenching her ankle slightly, and she sought a resting-place in a room which gave by a long French window on to the frost-spangled lawn, and by an arched doorway draped with

drawn-back curtains on to the hall. Her last partner made her comfortable in a lounge, and declared his willingness to spend the rest of the night endeavouring to lighten her enforced leisure. He was a very young man, with boyish, sunburnt face, and there was no doubt that he meant it.

"I brought this photograph to return to Lucy Markham," he said. "Clarence focussed the group and a nigger pulled the trigger. Very good plate and print, and it shows what kind of time those fellows have who go hunting things in Africa."

Eveline stretched out her hand for the picture almost too eagerly, and her companion was quick to profit by the opportunity for bending over her to explain. "There you can see Clarence. He's ever so much thinner—look at his face. That's the worst climate in the world, you know. The other one is Lyle. Very good fellow—perfect sample of the vigorous new manhood we are raising across the sea, as the Colonial papers say, when I last saw him. Very grim, hard look about him now, hasn't he? But he has not lost his old half-smile—and it's very like him. He stood just like that when I said good-bye, with a hand suggesting a shoulder of mutton with a vice inside it, on the long axe-haft."

Eveline, who possessed a vivid imagination, followed his pointing finger, and straightway the surroundings faded from before her. Instead, she saw a breadth of golden wheat with a man's figure forced up against it, poising a heavy jar above his head. She had drawn from life, and knew it was a finely proportioned figure, with a great heart to match the powerful frame. Then, as though it were a dissolving view, the scene changed again, and, perhaps because of the books of travel, another rose out of blue wreaths of pungent wood-smoke in which the same figure stood forth against a background of tropical forest. The room grew suddenly hot, and she fancied she could smell spices, lilies, and river mud. The photograph was a good one, and what her companion termed the half-smile shone clear in the honest eyes. She remembered it perfectly. It was some time before she grasped the remaining details, Clarence sitting with a certain

limpness in his attitude on a great mahogany log, and a bull-necked man grasping the woolly hair of a half-naked coloured cook.

"I would very much like that picture. So you knew Mr. Lyle? I met him in the North," she said; and Dane, who had made a hunting trip in British Columbia, answered with enthusiasm, "I should think I did. Everybody for leagues round his ranch knew Ted Lyle, and liked him. Took me in and treated me as if we were both of us forest princes, while my Indian guides never played a single trick after they discovered that I knew him. He was a person of consequence out there."

A young woman passed in through the curtains with her hand on the arm of a man of middle age, and, catching part of what was said, laughed as she asked, "Is Charlie telling you about his Wild West hero, Eveline? If you don't check him severely he will discourse all night about that most romantic personage. Rescued Indian princesses and slew grizzly bears with empty hands, didn't he, Charlie?"

"No," said the young man hotly. "But he hewed through the king log keying a timber jamb that would have wrecked a poor contractor's bridge, and dived clear of the resulting chaos a second before a thousand thrashing pine trunks thundered through. It's a well-authenticated story, and he didn't tell me. Also, he killed a wounded panther with a hunting-knife in a tangle of giant fern. It was worrying a dog of his."

The other man took the photograph, saying, "He must be a somewhat reckless sort of person. The Pacific Slope panther is a vicious beast. I know the English-bred bush rancher—perfectly credible story. He looks the kind of man to do it."

The pair passed on, and Hilda Markham entering discovered Eveline looking abstractedly before her with the photograph in her hand, while her young companion was still discoursing with fluency. She sank into a lounge as Eveline said, "The contrasts are rather great, and that photograph blunts my sense of enjoyment. Here are we with the best the wide world can furnish scattered lavishly for our delectation, and our friends out there,

half-fed, worn by sickness, and perhaps in imminent peril. Any doubtful person has only to examine this picture, and after doing so listen, to be convinced."

The strains of an excellent orchestra, rustle of costly fabrics, and rhythmic beat of feet keeping time to the measure of a waltz, came in between the looped-back curtains, and as Eveline looked down the gaunt face in the photograph fixed her attention. Then she said, with an unusual depth in her voice, "I wonder what it feels like to be really hungry. Of course, none of us can even guess."

Hilda Markham, a radiant dark beauty, thanks to Eveline's stratagem, shivered a little; but her escort, who had risen from a small beginning, said, "You are hardly correct, Miss Lonsdale. There are a good many people in this city, and, strange as it may appear, three at least under this very roof, who would enlighten you. It is a distinctly unpleasant sensation at first, but one can get used to it, and some men never work better than when just starved sufficiently to make them uncomfortable. May I see?—ah, a photograph of explorers. I fancied you were asking a purely abstract question."

"That is my brother," said Hilda; and when the pair who had passed through before halted behind her chair Eveline added, "No—this is Mr. Markham, the one in line with the witch cottonwood. The man holding the Krooboy is, I believe, Cummings the engineer, whom Miss Markham was amusing us about!"

"How did you know it was a witch cottonwood, and that the nigger was a Kroo?" asked the man, who had formerly served the Government on the deadly coast, and Eveline did not meet Hilda Markham's inquiring gaze as she answered, "I have read a little about West Africa lately. If you are not returning to dance, will you tell us what you can about that interesting country?"

The former officer glanced at his young companion, then, smiling drily, held up a programme which was mostly blank. "Just because I once spent a few years in the interesting country I am an enforced idler," he said. "Rheumatic fever is not conducive to agility. How shall I begin, and what shall I tell you?"

"All about everything," said Eveline, smiling graciously.

Some of the group sat still, and some disappeared at intervals. Others came in with inquiries as to the injured ankle, and stayed to listen, for Eveline drew out the narrator with leading questions, and, roused by her manifest interest, he talked well. His stories were also stirring—strange tales of sickness, peril, and hunger faced and overcome in a very wild and lonely land. Meantime, to heighten by contrast their sombre undertone, the rise and fall of dreamy music mingled with laughter and merry voices pulsed into the room, and, in kaleidoscopic succession of changing colours, dresses whose value exceeded the sum many of the fair wearers' countrymen had staked and lost their lives for, rustled past the bright curve of curtained arch.

So the minutes fled, and the orchestra had several times changed from measure to measure before the speaker departed, half-ashamed of his own eloquence, and Hilda Markham said, "You have stirred up several excellent ladies to envy, hatred and malice, Eveline, and I dare say it is years since that man talked so much."

Eveline was quite aware, even as she listened, that surmises would be made concerning the reason for her interest in the Dark Continent, but she possessed a mischievous sense of humour, and the knowledge did not trouble her. If any one decided it was connected with Clarence Markham, that, she thought, was his own business, and it might very well prevent his guessing at a better. It was not the memory of Clarence which filled her mind, but that of another man cast in less conventional and more heroic mould, who, when she lightly mentioned what was not her heart's desire, had with primitive simplicity started on this African quest to win it for her. The act of silent homage touched her more than many passionate declarations. Eveline was driven homeward in a contemplative mood, and a few days later called on one of the trustees for her little property in his office. She could draw no more than the interest on certain investments without his and Markham's signature.

"You know I am going out with Mrs. Markham to the Canaries," she said. "I might want to buy something, and would like you to sign a blank cheque."

"It is a most unusual thing, my dear young lady," said the trustee. "Isn't it wicked of you to tempt me? You might invest the money in something that would ruin you."

"A castle in Spain, for instance," said Eveline, with a winning smile. "Now I have never asked you a favour yet—perhaps because there was no necessity; you were always so kind to me. I am a severely sensible person, but if you refuse I shall certainly buy what I want on credit, and send the bills to you."

The man of business made several excuses, but Eveline persisted, and though he was grey and elderly she knew how to adapt her powers of fascination, until at last he said—

"I suppose I shall have to agree, though it is really most reprehensible of me. I have, however, reason to believe Miss Lonsdale a shrewd young lady—and if she wasn't, Northop Markham, who must also sign the cheque, is by no means a fool."

## XX

### FLORENCE ASSERTS HERSELF

WHILE some of their English friends feasted, and others practised the uncomfortable virtues of self-denial and economy, the time did not pass smoothly with the timber cutters. Clarence, it is true, had shipped three rafts of splendid mahogany, but as provisions grew scanty the labourers decreased in corresponding ratio. Unlike his Mahomedan kinsman dwelling further north, the seaboard African heathen is decidedly averse to agricultural or other continuous effort. Neither is this greatly needed, but the soil will not feed him without some desultory scratching, and, being uncertain as to

what might happen, the negroes declined to plant crops for others to gather. Therefore, while the camp grew empty, the Europeans ascertained, by disagreeable experience, how little a white man could subsist upon. The Krooboys, however, remained, because, being strangers in a strange country, they knew desertion might prove a dangerous remedy.

To render the outlook even worse, when Clarence had almost forgotten the occurrence, Okambo, or his high priest, sent in a messenger to demand the body of his legal victim, and his request translated was rather pointed than civil: "Send back the slave you stole from us, or when we smash Headman Shotille we will smash you."

The white men considered it very briefly, while the fugitive, who guessed what the demand was, squatted in the hot sand close behind them, and Clarence said, "It is very hard luck that we should have another trouble forced upon us now, but I should feel mean for ever if I gave the poor devil up after promising him protection. There, don't whine, Sambo. You're safe in the meantime, but I sincerely wish we had never seen you. I'm waiting for your opinions; you have all a stake in the game."

Lyle looked at the herald, who fell back a few paces. "Sambo has his failings, including hazy ideas concerning the rights of property, but I wouldn't like to see him buried to the chin or nailed to a cottonwood by the limbs. Therefore, as we are sure to have trouble with him sooner or later in any case, the shortest and best answer is to tell Okambo to do his most devilish worst."

"That's very good palaver," broke in Cummings. "You ought to have been an engineer, Lyle. Shall I take that nigger, Clarence, and wash him in the creek?"

"No," said Markham. "He's entitled to an envoy's privileges. Of course, there is only one thing we can do, but, considering what depends on us, I wish we hadn't to. Interpreter, explain that we're sorry we can't humour his majesty."

When this was translated the messenger, who first boarded his canoe, said, "Okambo will kill every man in this camp when he comes for his slave;" and Mark-

ham's face was grim as he returned the answer, "He is welcome to, if he can; and whenever he comes he will find us ready for him."

Weeks passed, and still Okambo made no sign, and so one night Florence and Mrs. Johnston sat without uneasiness alone in the Warrimba residency. The two missionaries had gone to a distant village in search of tidings. Every person of consequence, black or white, had spent his leisure in this fashion during the last few months, but, while all agreed that there would be developments shortly, none except perhaps Okambo knew exactly when and how. The night was hot, and still, and steamy. A half-moon silvering the mist on the river streaked the compound with the shadows of palms and cottonwood, while the galvanised iron roof shrank and crackled under the cooling dew. The light of the lamp was dimmed by a halo of insects which endeavoured to burn themselves therein, and because door and casement were open wide Florence could see the forest loom—mysterious, solemn, and shadowy—against the soft indigo. By this time she had acquired the vague fear which the native who dwells in it feels for the African forest.

Presently a man broke out from it, pressed hurriedly across the compound, and she rose with an exclamation as a negro dripping with slime, whose naked shoulder was seamed by a broad red gash, stalked into the room. He had once served them as gardener, but now, mottled by tattoo, with knitted hair and long spear, whose corkscrew blade was also crusted, presented a somewhat terrifying specimen of the forest warrior. Of late, however, Florence had grown used to night alarms and the sight of wounds, so she listened calmly at first, and then with growing terror as he explained his presence. He had blundered across a small band of Okambo's warriors who were watching the river two leagues down stream, he said, and Florence experienced a shock of nausea as he related with full details how he had cut his way through them. He also desired his wound dressed, and was of opinion that his assailants had no design upon the missionaries, whose path led well clear of the ambush. Neither did he think they would attack the station. It appeared

certain they merely hoped to trap a white man who had passed in a steamer, which, from the description, was certainly Markham's.

"Get the balsam and plaster, Florence," said Mrs. Johnston quietly, adding when she took them, "Why, you are trembling all through. Give me the bottle before you spill every drop in it," and Florence, who was glad to do so, leaned against the table with a sudden pain at her heart.

The negro submitted to the dressing, which must have been painful, with African stolidity, and when he departed without a word of thanks Mrs. Johnston said, "Go out and see if one of the boys will warn the man they are waiting for. The old bush path cuts off the big river bend, and a messenger might reach a point below the ambush in an hour. If the story is quite correct there is evidently little time to lose. But he must not come to Warrimba."

Florence was glad to escape, but the few among its inmates who might have been willing to help her had already deserted Warrimba, and none of the remnant would venture. It was in vain she pleaded, bribed, and even threatened, until at last one offered to guide her part of the way in return for a little silver watch—her dead mother's gift. The Africans explained with some logic that although they greatly desired the other few poor trinkets she possessed the jewellery would not be of much use if Okambo's retainers drove a spear-blade through them. Then she returned, with determination stamped upon her face, to say, "Not one of the cowards will go; but I cannot sit still while Okambo's savages murder an unsuspecting Englishman!"

"That is by no means certain," said Mrs. Johnston. "He is evidently, at least, a daring and clever man, and might, if he did return that way, either discover his assailants or run his steamer through. It is deplorable that such things can happen, but if we fail to procure a messenger we can do nothing."

Florence stood near the casement, breathing with difficulty, as she stared with eyes that were wide with horror at the wall of forest. She could picture the men

it hid crouching among the undergrowth behind a long gun rested on a forked twig with the lust of murder in their hearts. She also knew the spot they had cunningly selected. The waterway narrowed in, and a shoal on the opposite side would force the launch close in under the bank, where the muscular naked bodies lay covered by leaves that would not even rustle until, breaking out through the powder smoke, they made the fatal spring. But she dared not pursue the fancy further, and turned towards her companion white to the lips, saying, "It is too horrible. I must go and warn him."

"Sit down," said Mrs. Johnston coldly. "Florence, you must learn to command yourself. You are not certain there is any danger, and if there were you could not help him. You would fall into the negroes' hands most certainly. I will speak to the boys."

Hitherto Florence had been dominated by the elder woman's will, but now she was filled with a strength not wholly her own. The touch of a man's lips on her fingers had awakened her to a wider knowledge of life, and when she lay sick and uncomely with fever one day she had learned two secrets, his and her own. That she would never marry him appeared certain, but there was no concealing from herself the fact that she loved him.

"I cannot let him be murdered," she repeated, with a gesture of terror. "I am going to Palm Point by the old bush path. Even if they promised, I could not trust the negroes."

"You are excited, Florence. Do not be theatrical, absurd," said Mrs. Johnston, moving quietly between her and the door. "Go back to your chair immediately. I am responsible for your safety. You shall not go."

Florence stood rigidly still, breathing fast and unevenly, with bloodless, parted lips. Then she shook her terror from her, and, raising one hand, said, "Stand aside, I am a free woman: let me go."

Had she thought it likely to avail her Mrs. Johnston would not have hesitated to use physical force, but one glance at the girl's set face and strung-up form convinced her she would fail in this. So she said, with quiet incisiveness, "Have you counted the cost of what you

intend to do, and forgotten what is due to your profession? Must I speak still more plainly? Would you even risk your own good name?"

Florence, the questioner thought, had utterly changed. There was now no trace of hot colour or confusion, but a grey tinge of cold anger crept into her cheeks, and for a moment she looked—dangerous.

"How dare you?" she asked in a voice that rang harsh and hollow. "You, who preach love and charity. I know whom I can trust. And what would even foul slander matter with a precious life at stake?"

Mrs. Johnston had failed twice, but she made ready for the last attack, which promised certain victory.

"You are very young and innocent, Florence, or you would realise that you are betraying yourself in every word," she said, still in the same even voice. "Have you not learned yet that this world is full of wickedness? The man you have such confidence in is not even a soldier—only a ruffianly smuggler of arms or gin. Think well, my child, before you leave Warrimba for his sake. There are matters I dare not withhold from headquarters, and the imprudence might be recorded against you for years."

This time Florence scarcely heeded her. Gross insult would have faded into insignificance before her intensity of purpose, and she answered, "I do not believe you—you have been deceived; I should not believe it unless with his own lips he admitted the truth."

Then, brushing past her superior as though she did not see her, she went down the verandah stairway as one walking in a dream. What that journey cost her in sheer physical terror, after the negro returned even earlier than he promised, Florence told nobody until some months had passed, and most men would have hesitated to traverse the old bush path at midnight in time of peace and security. It wound in places, a foot-wide strip of quaking ooze, among foul depths of slime; then stretched, a low-arched tunnel walled in by tangled creeper festoons and wicked thorns, through Egyptian blackness after nightfall, and even at noonday everlasting shadow. Once, too, it skirted the brink of a creek haunted by scaly

saurians which crawled forth in search of warm-blooded prey, but it cut off a deep U bend of the river, and, according to the negro's story, time was valuable.

Florence went bareheaded, with thin, nervous hands clenched tight at her side, the white dress that was dew-soaked in ten minutes by the touch of dripping leaves clinging in wet folds about her, into this home of the negroes' malevolent devils and all creatures that love corruption. Loathsome crabs had tunnelled the soil beneath her; huge spiders, whose bite might mean amputation, lurked in every rotten branch the little foot crushed in passing. Great snakes slid in sinuous coils among tangled grasses and matted leaves, and once the eerie cry of a leopard rang out like the mocking of a fiend.

But she was wrapped in a mantle of innocency, and it may be one of the bright-winged angels she had dreamt of in earlier days held before her a flaming shield, and mercifully dimmed her eyes, for she saw nothing, and the powers of darkness might neither hurt nor turn her aside. The primitive races also believe that the beasts see and fear many things beyond the scope of human vision. So she passed on scatheless, noticing only the loom of mighty branches, and in places a fantastic network of creeper ropes sharp against a rift of indigo. Neither did she hear more than her own heart beating, and the swish-swish of dewy leaves, until once, when a stray shaft of moonlight filtering down beat full upon her, there was a strange hoarse cry.

Florence stood fast a moment, a slender, ethereal figure white with the death colour from her blanched forehead to the hem of the draggled dress, against a background of impenetrable gloom, and somebody or something fled crashing in blind panic through the underbrush. Then, with a long indrawing of her breath, she started again. At last the shimmer of oily water caught her eyes, and she groped her way towards the end of a point that stretched out into the river. Here she sank down gasping among the great buttress roots of a cottonwood to wait and listen. She could only hear the oily gurgle of the flood, and the strange night voices of the forest, whose

whole origin not even the bushman knows. Then, for the first time, she counted the cost—and did not regret what she had done. Nothing mattered, death itself perhaps least of all, if she could deliver her warning in time.

An hour later Clarence Markham stood upright at the launch's helm, glancing before him up stream, while Lyle sat on the cockpit coamings smoking tranquilly. They slid alternately over stretches of moonlit water, that glistened like molten silver and set up a drowsy boiling under the bows, and through belts of blackness filled with steam and almost impenetrable.

"When all things were made good!" said Lyle. "You needn't grin, Clarence, for if it's not quite original we have proved the truth of it as regards the hungry man's friend. It's three weeks since I have eaten a square meal, and it was only tobacco which kept me from looting the larder. To give the devil his due, Cummings never seems ravenously hungry, and I've had no difficulty in restraining him from an over-indulgence in river-water. Is Okambo dead or sleeping? I'm positively longing for the languid heathen to move, if only on the odd chance of cutting out his commissariat."

Markham laughed. "I remember the day I couldn't eat a steak that hadn't the right grade of colour in the middle. I could eat it raw or carbonadoed all through, with gusto, now. There's a great deal of the animal in us, after all!"

"Oh yes," said the Colonial. "The instincts of the half-starved wolf have been gradually filling me, and if Okambo doesn't come shortly I'm going to look for him. Hallo! do you see anything yonder under the cotton-wood? Gone again! Moonbeams must have dazzled me, or it was perhaps one of the supernatural manifestations one may at times attain to by severely mortifying the flesh. At least, somebody said so, and we have kept a good many fasts of late."

Markham laughed. "I never suspected you of a capacity for seeing visions, Ted, and we have severed our connection with spirits of any kind some time ago. Not a teaspoonful left, even in the medicine chest. The

little that should have gone into it went, by accident, into Cummings instead."

"Quit fooling," said the Colonial. "Great Columbus! I can see it plain. Are you blind, Clarence? There! It's beckoning, close beside the water's edge."

This time Clarence started and rubbed his eyes. Sharp and clear in the moonlight a slender white figure stood forth upon the point, and Lyle said stupidly, "It's a woman."

Clarence jammed over the helm, and while the launch sheered in towards the point a cry came out across the water, and he said hoarsely, "It's Florence."

It was Lyle who jumped for the reversing lever, saying, "Are you going to run the vessel up high and dry?" but hardly had the propeller checked the little steamer's way than Markham was floundering shorewards waist-deep in water. Then as he strode towards the white-robed figure Lyle discreetly busied himself among the engines.

Markham could never quite recall what he said, but when he took both of Florence's hands in his own and drew her towards him the girl did not at first resist. Then she drew clear and shrank back a few paces, saying, with a curious quaver in her voice, "No. Is this the return you would make for the risk I ran for you? Stand still and listen. You are in peril, and going to your death."

A few seconds earlier Clarence had felt sure of victory, and he might have decided a momentous question then and there, but that Mrs. Johnston's words had not all been spoken in vain. As it was, he stood fast, abashed at a sudden change in the girl's bearing.

"I have only one excuse, and you must hear me first," he said.

Florence checked him by a wave of her lifted hand. "We dare not wait a moment. Terrible danger hangs over both of us. I have come to warn you, and the assassins may even find us here. You must listen—and promise."

Clarence afterwards decided that he would not have pledged himself to observe the conditions implied but for Lyle's presence a few yards away, and the fact that

the danger mentioned must threaten Florence too. A painful explanation was necessary, he remembered, before he put his fate to the test, and this would require more time than was clearly admissible. So he said, "I promise on condition that you will when possible allow me to justify myself," and Florence related as much as she considered judicious of what had happened at Warrimba.

"Heaven knows we are neither of us worthy of even the wetting of that little shoe," said the man, overwhelmed by the knowledge of what she had done for him. "Neither can we thank you—any thanks would be useless and inadequate, and I tremble at the thought of what you risked on the way. It was a special mercy—but nothing in the forest dare hurt you. Now I must carry you on board the launch. There is no other way."

It cost Markham a strenuous effort to keep his promise when the shapely burden rested in his arms and he felt a heart beat fast close beside his own. But though his clasp was firmer than may have been absolutely necessary, he made no sign, and, mistrusting his own strength of will, was thankful as well as sorry when Lyle helped their fair visitor on board over the rail.

A few breathless words made the position plain, and Lyle said, "We dare not run any risk with Miss Ellory on board, or it might have been possible to surprise the watchers in turn. She must return to Warrimba at once, and if the niggers are blocking the river we can go round by the backwaters. Start the engines and light the lamp in the saloon, Clarence. You have done a very brave thing, Miss Ellory, but it has been almost too much for you, and you can rest in comfort on the locker cushions there."

Clarence, reappearing, drew aside the sliding scuttle leading to the four-foot-high saloon, and would have said something as Florence descended, but that, unseen by her, Lyle's hand closed hard upon the back of his neck, and he stammered, half-choked, "You are safe—will be in Warrimba in an hour."

Lyle drew the scuttle to, and then, jumping for the helm again, observed drily, "Clarence, are you too thick-headed to understand all that girl has done for you?

Then pray for sense until you do. Can't you see she feels the position? And, by the Lord, if you accentuate it by any superfluous sentimentality I'll not only choke you in earnest, but you'll destroy your chances into the bargain."

Markham smiled instead of frowning, though he still felt the grasp of Lyle's fingers on his neck. "Thanks! I only wanted to tell her about a rug," he said. "I have still a little sense, though it's hard enough when—— But there's no use inflicting this upon you; you won't understand until you find out for yourself some day. Still, once we reach Warrimba I shall tell her exactly who I am."

"I wish you good luck," Lyle answered. "I only intervened in your own interests. Even slow-thinking outsiders occasionally see the points of the game. And now forget about it, and predict what is to follow this move of Okambo's."

"Forget it!" said Clarence. "Great heavens!—well, you, too, may learn sense some day."

Meantime, the launch circled round through another channel towards a network of backwaters leading into one which flowed close past Warrimba, and how long Okambo's assassins waited in vain for her did not appear.

## XXI

### THE DENUNCIATION

Evil fortune attended Markham's wooing, for it is possible that had circumstances permitted his making a frank avowal when he found Florence under the cotton-wood she might have yielded. But because they did not the opportunity was lost, while when at last the lights of Warrimba blinked through the river mist it was too late.

Florence came out into the well when Clarence tapped upon the scuttle, and nothing was said while Lyle ran the steamer alongside the bank, after which, beckoning

his companion, the Colonial whispered, "You will remember how much lies at stake, and that we dare not lose a moment in getting back to camp. Okambo may have sent another detachment there."

"I will remember," said Clarence. "But I would give half my life to be free from responsibility to-night."

He helped Florence ashore, and the girl, who trembled a little, walked beside him in silence until, when they were half-way between the launch and the residence, Markham halted.

"I cannot let you go until you have heard me out," he said. "It is due to both of us. First, throwing myself upon your mercy, I must make a confession—and then——"

Again Florence checked him. "Not to-night, I cannot listen now," she said. "It is useless to—pretend—but I cannot bear any more, and must have time to think," and while the man saw the moment he had longed for slipping past, a figure stood in the lighted doorway calling, "Florence!"

"May the——" commenced Markham, savage with disappointment. "Only two minutes. You shall not go."

"Go back to your steamer," said the girl, moving suddenly apart from him, and again the voice called, "Florence!"

"That, at least, I will not do until I have seen you safe in Mrs. Johnston's hands," stammered Markham, grinding his heels into the sand. "And you must promise to listen when I return. Florence, neither of us can ignore what has happened. Can't you see it has changed both our lives for us? They can never be quite the same again."

"I will hear you when you come back to Warrimba," said Florence, who had twined her fingers in a fold of her dress, as she hurried towards the house, and Markham, who walked behind her, said when they entered it, "I bring you Miss Ellory back safe. My comrade and I owe our escape to her courage, and we both thank you also, madame, for permitting her, and for another benefit received from Warrimba."

"You owe me no thanks whatever," said Mrs. Johnston, with perfect correctness.

Clarence ignored the manifest abruptness, and continued hurriedly, "You are yourselves in danger, and I can at least offer you a safe retreat in case Okambo's men visit the station."

"There is no danger. They will not attack Warrimba—and we are safer here," answered the lady. "My husband and his colleague should be back by dawn."

"But have you any right to expose Miss Ellory to any needless risk?" and Mrs. Johnston answered, "Every right to dispose of my subordinates as I consider best. We cannot go with you—and it is already very late."

The hint was plain enough, and after further useless protests Markham, glancing at Florence, who did not apparently see him, bowed to Mrs. Johnston and departed. Florence watched him cross the compound, and then turned towards her superior with an unspoken question in her eyes.

"I have nothing to say to you," said Mrs. Johnston. "Go to your own room, and I can hardly add—sleep. You have given me much to think about, and I must have leisure to consider it in."

Florence went out without a word, flung herself down on the canvas cot with her face between her hands, and struggled through the remaining hours of darkness with a tide of conflicting emotions, until, when the red sun swung up above the forest, she went out heavy-eyed and weary into the freshness of the morning. How much Mrs. Johnston told Legh or her husband she never learned, but neither of the men made more than a casual reference to what had happened, while the time occupied by Markham's journey to Mahogany Camp was spent in bitter struggle by Florence. She knew what he would ask, and that she must choose between love and a life of self-denial in her present vocation, to desert which seemed a betrayal of a sacred trust, while her superior's suspended judgment hung an indefinite terror over her head.

She had done no wrong, but the elder lady's warning had revealed to her possibilities she dared hardly contemplate, for she had met good people who could discover evil in the most innocent carelessness, and knew that suspicion is much more common than charity. At last

a launch flying the broad ensign and filled with black soldiers steamed up Warrimba Creek, and the inmates of the station gathered to receive the young white man who landed from it.

"You know perhaps as much of the native troubles as we do," he commenced abruptly, perhaps because he had misgivings concerning the success of his errand. "There is, however, one thing you do not know, and it is my duty to bring you a warning. Okambo has overstepped the bounds at last—sacked a village down river we had pledged ourselves to protect, and kidnapped oil carriers almost within sight of a Consulate. In consequence of this we're gathering all our forces to punish him."

"Do you think an expedition would be successful?" asked Legh; and the young officer waved his hand as a signal that he did not desire interruption.

"Of course it will," he answered airily. "But before it starts I am going to send Okambo a summons to appear at the Consulate and answer for his subordinates' action, or send down hostages as surety that he will meet all indemnities."

Legh smiled sadly, and the speaker continued, "Now I must come to the point. We do not consider you would be safe here in the event of hostilities, and I must request you to accompany me to the coast on my return in several days. Perhaps I should have introduced myself at first—Lieutenant Lawrence Seymour, of the Protectorate service."

Legh seemed puzzled, and Mrs. Johnston said, "We will consider what you have told us. We understood, however, that another officer was engaged in negotiating with or watching Okambo. He called here more than once, and his name resembled your own—it was Seaton."

Then there was consternation as Seymour said exultingly, "There is nobody of that name in our service at present, and I must thank you, madame, for putting me on that man's trail. He is a rascally adventurer making financial profit by the sale of arms during the present unrest, and doubtless fomenting it; and we have long been anxious for definite news of him. When," and the speaker grew visibly eager, "did you last hear of him?"

"On the night of Tuesday last," said Mrs. Johnston. "We have been most wickedly deceived. I may say we expect him here again very shortly, and my assistant, Miss Ellory, might perhaps tell you more. Florence!"

Seymour, who had been too intent on his business hitherto, for the first time noticed the impression he had made, and glanced with some interest at the faces of the listeners. He decided that Mrs. Johnston looked hard and vindictive, Legh struggling with some emotion he could not understand, and Johnston startled much against his wishes out of an habitual serenity, and he was probably correct in each surmise. He also noticed that Florence's fingers were twisted nervously together, and that her face resembled marble. She lay limp, and it seemed incapable of motion, in a canvas chair.

Then with a chivalrous instinct which did him credit, he said, "I will not trouble Miss Ellory with any questions unless they are absolutely necessary. May I ask you, sir, whether the man who has personated me already actually told you he was a Protectorate officer, and exactly how you became acquainted with him?"

"I do not think he ever alluded to his occupation," said Legh. "In fact, I remember him saying more than once that he was not a soldier, which seemed a meaningless distinction, for he had evidently been under military training. We could not help concluding he was an agent of the Government, both from his appearance and the fact that no one else would be likely to make mysterious journeys through these creeks just now. Is it impossible that he may, after all, be a naturalist or sportsman seeking uncommon game? One or two have ventured into this district, and we heard vague rumours we did not credit about some white men felling trees."

"Quite!" said Seymour. "Can't waste time proving it. The man is a contraband trader stirring the niggers up to fight. You have not told me yet where you first met him."

"He and his two comrades came out with Miss Ellory in the same steamer, and afterwards convoyed her up river from the outpost," Mrs. Johnston interposed.

"It would be a favour, if I may venture to trouble

you," said Seymour, looking towards the girl. "I have orders if possible to effect his arrest, and even a few words might be of great assistance."

Florence rose up, and the young officer fidgeted as she glanced at him. Next, turning towards Mrs. Johnston, she said in a strained voice, "I cannot give you any information whatever on the subject."

Then, before Seymour could answer, she passed out of the door, and there was a trying silence after it closed noisily behind her.

"Miss Ellory has been dangerously ill, and recent events have impeded her recovery. That is, I think, sufficient explanation," said Legh; and Seymour, whose eyes grew keen, nodded stiffly.

"I don't want to force anything unpleasant upon you, but it is your duty to assist me in apprehending this man," he said. "I gathered that you expected an early visit from him?"

Legh moved uneasily. He could not deny what the officer said, and recently Mrs. Johnston had, without committing herself by more than casual hints, managed to convey the impression that Markham was a formidable rival. It would be an easy matter to detain him at Warrimba while word was sent to the armed steamer, but Legh abhorred anything that savoured of treachery. So he was thankful when Johnston broke in, "Neither my colleague nor myself are policemen. Have you a warrant from the chief Consul?"

"I have verbal instructions to bring him to the nearest outpost for examination," answered Seymour.

"We do not wish to shield any offender from justice, but he was our guest, and without a definite warrant or clear proof of his guilt we cannot assist in setting a trap for him," said Legh. "We do not know when he will return—you must take my word for that—but we will do nothing to hamper your own efforts. Nobody could be more anxious than we are to prevent an extension of the arms traffic or further violence."

"My thanks!" said Seymour drily. "Now a few other questions——" and when they were answered he took his leave, saying, "I cannot well attend to two affairs

at once, and my business with Okambo is of the first importance. We can discuss the other subject when I return."

He steamed away, leaving consternation behind, and Florence, who locked the door of her room, sat still as a statue and, in spite of the temperature, almost as cold, repeating over and over again, "How could he? Oh, how could he?"

Some days later Markham steamed down stream again, anxious and expectant, but determined that Florence should know his whole story. As it happened, darkness had closed down before he arrived, and nobody saw the launch, so when he strode into the verandah there was an exclamation from Johnston, sitting by the window, and Florence, who was passing through it, stood still. Markham did not see her, and holding his wide felt hat in his hand walked into the lighted room. Legh and Mrs. Johnston rose abruptly, the latter favouring him with a frigid stare, while the heart of the timber cutter sank as the missionary said with sternness—

"We have welcomed you at Warrimba hitherto—Mr. Seaton; but before we do so again must ask you two plain questions—exactly who you are, and what your business is in this region."

Markham, who felt as though the ground was sinking suddenly under his feet, groaned inwardly, and turned from the pair of suspicious faces towards Johnston, who said dismally, "Why did you deceive us, Seaton? I believed in you."

Florence heard the question, and because, quivering with suspense, she lacked the power to move, waited the answer in agonised alternation between faith and fear. She clutched at a pillar when it reached her: "I see that you have discovered something about me, and can only plead guilty to not having forced my confidence upon you. There were good reasons why I could not do so."

"Are you in the Government service in any capacity?" and Florence could not quite choke back a little cry when Markham answered, "No."

"I congratulate you on your frankness," continued Legh. "Then what is your profession?"

Clarence took a step forward and straightened himself. "I would challenge your right to question me but for the memory of your kindness," he said. "Will it satisfy you if I say that no harm can result to your prospects from the success of the venture I am responsible for!"

"I must press you for a more definite answer. Are you a trader, and is your name even Seaton?"

"At least, I never tried to deceive you," said Markham. "I am a trader, and my Christian names are Clarence Seaton; what the surname is I cannot yet reveal unless under a temporary pledge of secrecy. A lame explanation, I know, but there are reasons why you must accept it in the meantime."

Mrs. Johnston smiled scornfully, and Legh said, "It is lame, so lame that we do not ask for further confidence. I feel bitterly indignant that we should have been tricked into assisting to open up this district to a trade in gin. Is there absolutely no commercial sense of honour? Now, sir, though it is impossible to do so without regret, I must tell you that the Government authorities are desirous of apprehending you, and if ever you revisit Warrimba we shall assist them. We are bound to protect our people from the curse of alcohol. This is final!"

Clarence stood upright with an angry flush on his face, his broad hat in one hand, the other at his hip. "You have said sufficient. So be it. I might perhaps partly exonerate myself, but it would be at the expense of others, and I will not do it. Therefore, with all thanks for past benefits, I can only accept my dismissal."

He bowed to Mrs. Johnston, who could not veil her triumph, and strode out on to the verandah, where as it happened he caught sight of Florence shrinking back behind a pillar. He laid a detaining hand upon her arm, but the girl shook it off, and turned upon him white with anger.

"Stand back!" she said, drawing her dress closer to her with a gesture that expressed the fear of defilement. "You can henceforward have nothing to say to me. Take your fingers off my sleeve. Your touch is an insult."

Clarence obeyed. "You promised to listen before you condemned me," he said huskily. "Florence, you must

let me tell you why I did it," but the girl faced him with outraged dignity expressed in her very pose and little hands clenched.

"I will hear nothing—you confessed it with your own lips," she said. "How dare you—how dare you? You have taught me what utter contempt means, and I hate you."

Markham winced, for the words stung him like the lash of a whip. Twice he essayed to speak, and then said, "Florence, you shall listen. Do you know what you are doing? This may be the last time I shall ever see you."

Again he tried to grasp her arm as she drew further back from him, then dropped his hand to his side as she said, with a coldness that hurt him more than the previous passionate outbreak, "It must be. Go at once, and I shall try to forget I ever saw you!"

Markham turned in silence, and went down the stairway as one drunken, while Florence groped her way blindly to her own quarters. She had heard his statement to Legh, and it was sufficient. That his motives might justify him she could not at the moment believe. She even wondered whether she believed in anything, and only remembered that this man had not only won her affections under false pretences, but had as it were forced her to betray her love for him. And he was an outlaw, an impostor, one who made his profit by the ruin of the black men and spreading the means of murder.

Next day Seymour, returning, expressed much annoyance at hearing he had missed Markham, after which he said, "I presume you will be ready to come down river with me?"

The white inhabitants of Warrimba were all present—Florence utterly indifferent to what happened, Mrs. Johnston expressionless and prim, and both the men a little graver than usual.

"No," said Legh. "We thank you sincerely, but my colleague and I remain at Warrimba."

"Eh!" said Seymour. "Excuse me, but that is absurd, you know. Some of the hot-headed heathen might shoot you, and then you wouldn't be much use to any society. Besides, we should have to wipe out a lot

of them to avenge you. I wouldn't have put it so bluntly but that I want your co-operation, madame. You really couldn't let your husband run such risks?"

"You are mistaken," said Mrs. Johnston. "It is only by his express command, and because my presence would be a positive disadvantage, that I do not stay myself. It is clearly in the interest of his work that he should remain, and I must try to encourage him."

For once Florence noticed a trace of emotion in her superior, but there was more of the indomitable spirit which would sacrifice everything most dear if the future of the station demanded it. There was no doubt that Mrs. Johnston was at least willing to practise what she preached. Her husband did not look equally resolute, but Legh turned towards the officer.

"In return for your kind offer, I must explain," he said. "This place has been bought with human lives and suffering. If we remain it may yet become a power for good. If we desert it the bushmen will lose faith in our teaching."

"I see," said Seymour. "You have to maintain your prestige. Understand the feeling. Very sorry, but I shall have to force you."

"You do not quite understand," said Legh quietly. "It is not our personal honour we care one straw about. As to using force—if you take us you must take us handcuffed, and when we reach the coast I shall at once demand satisfaction from Calabar, and appeal if necessary to still higher authorities at home."

Seymour hesitated. He had merely been told to bring the missionaries down to a place of safety. So he said, "I only meant it for your good—used the word figuratively. In one way, it is very plucky of you, though most unreasonable. Suppose the niggers burn the whole place up if you stay?"

"Then we must take the chances of what may happen," said Legh. "You who run heavy risks in the service of a Government which blunders occasionally cannot deny us the right to do so."

"I can't," said Seymour frankly. "I wish I could. Well, if you will neither be persuaded nor coerced I

suppose I must leave you; but you surely don't intend to keep the two ladies?"

"No," said Johnston. "We would take it as a favour if you would provide them with a safe passage to our Silver River station."

All preparations were soon completed, and Mrs. Johnston embraced her husband in public with an affection that was certainly genuine, while Florence said to Legh, "I do not know if I shall ever return to Warrimba. Most probably I shall not, but I cannot go without thanking you for many kindnesses."

Legh sighed as he shook hands with her, for he had almost abandoned hope, and Seymour came forward. "I wish you both good luck, and you will excuse anything that looked like rudeness," he said. "If circumstances permitted I should have liked nothing better than to stay and see it out beside you."

Then the party boarded the launch, and the two left behind watched the little vessel until she vanished under the branches, leaving them alone, cut off from all hope of white man's help in a perilous corner of savage Africa.

"I wonder," said Johnston, who coughed vigorously, "I wonder whether either of us will be alive when another month has passed;" and Legh answered simply, "That is perhaps of no great importance, and only God knows."

When Seymour, who delivered his passengers safely, reported to his superior, that officer said, "You have made a sad mess of it. With a little judicious firmness you could have brought them away, while now, even if not murdered, they will increase our already overnumerous difficulties."

"I am afraid you hardly understand that man's character, sir," said Seymour. "He doesn't say very much, but there's something in him which one can't resist, and makes you do the very thing you don't want to. I did my utmost, but it's my opinion that if he once made up his mind to stay a whole Yoruba battalion wouldn't bring him away."

## XXII

### THE COMING OF OKAMBO

LATE one night, not long after Markham's dismissal from Warrimba, the three adventurers lounged in company with Headman Shotille outside the latter's house. Since Cummings first visited him, Shotille had, by means of forced labour, built himself a residence in keeping with his recently acquired importance. It was a caricature on a small scale of a Government Consulate, and when completed Cummings had shown the sable artificers how to prevent it falling over bodily by the application of massive cottonwood shores.

Okambo's men, failing in their mission, had vanished into the forest as mysteriously as they came, and because water carries no trail Shotille's best scouts failed to discover a trace of their presence. During the last month he had been quietly removing his possessions and wasting powder training his men in flintlock musketry, and now awaited the arrival of a canoe flotilla which a petty headman was sending in with merchandise in payment of tribute and outstanding debts. The said headman was suspected of making overtures to Okambo, but, after many broken promises, the flotilla had actually started, because naked scouts had seen the canoes sliding at nightfall down a sluggish creek. The purport of the white men's visit was to obtain if possible some definite information respecting the prospects for peace or war, but, beyond vague assertions that Okambo was afraid of him, Shotille, as usual, kept his own counsel.

The night was even hotter than usual, and depressing. The steam which rose from the river hung in motionless horizontal strata athwart the edge of the half-seen cottonwoods, but here and there the oily water reflected with a faint steely lustre the shimmer of a star. A few dying fires burned redly across the clearing, and now and then a low call announced a hidden watchman's presence. Shotille said little except that he expected the return of a trusted scout with the canoes, and, oppressed by the

stagnant atmosphere, the white men were too listless to talk.

Clarence would not, in any case, have been in a communicative mood. He still smarted under the recollection of what had happened at Warrimba. Concealment of any kind was repugnant to him, but he had been forced into a false position, and the one way of escape from it—a definite statement of his purpose—would, on account of the missionaries' representations, have been followed by the intervention of the Government authorities. This, had he been summoned to withdraw, would have given keen and richer rivals an opportunity, and for the sake of those who depended on him Markham had doggedly determined to accomplish what he came out to do before he cleared himself, though the latter promised to be difficult. He remembered how Florence once said, "I hate all pretence and trickery," and the contempt in her voice when he last went out from her presence set his ears tingling even then.

"I hate you. How dare you?" The words repeated themselves, and inflicted the more torture because, in that moment of agony, Florence had forgotten all reserve, and the man who heard them could, without any prompting from vanity, complete the sentence. He had lost her more completely than if she were dead, and the heavy price he had paid for the welfare of others had been paid in vain; but regrets were useless, he thought, and he must endeavour to meet the results with some attempt at fortitude. So far, his efforts to do so had only rendered him a most unpleasant companion, and filled him with a stubborn resolve to carry out his purpose in spite of every obstacle.

"You have had the blues lately, Clarence," said Cummings, who did not know all that had passed. "If you're not better to-morrow I'll get out my calabash and funnel. What did I say? This man sick too much, King Shotille. Lib for cry all day for white mammy in England."

"Dam silly man," said the bush ruler. "Come back to-mollow, and I dash him one dozen fine black one."

"It's good palaver," continued the irrepressible Cummings. "There are lots of good fish in the sea, and the

benighted heathen's wise. Still, I'm not saying the one I saw at Thornton wouldn't take any man's fancy. If I'd been sure of the concession, might have tried myself. She's big, solid, and handsome—make two of the missionary lady. They're all nerves and temper when they're under the hundredweight. The nigger's not wholly foolish when he judges them by weight."

He ceased abruptly, for Lyle stepped upon his toe, and even after a sojourn in Africa Lyle possessed considerable avoirdupois. "Some jokes are dangerous to the maker, and that is one of them," he said. "If you attempt another of the same kind one of us will go head-first over the verandah rails."

"Bad man!" said the dusky chief, grinning. "When one of my people dun talk too much, I lib for fetch out matchet and chop him dam head off."

"You've broken two toes," said Cummings, limping. "If it had been any other man I would have been glad to try, but there's too much steel about you—and I'll pass it over, Lyle. But what is wrong, Clarence, or what did those folks at Warrimba say to shake you up so?"

"Several things," said Markham. "It all began with the wretched uniform, and no doubt I deserved them, but it's not soothing to be looked upon as a thief in disguise. I'm also a little tired of your pleasantries, and your wit resembles a cart-horse's kick. It lacks delicacy and finish. But chiefly I'm anxious. The scout is a long time coming, and there's something suspicious about Shotille."

"Just so," said Cummings aside. "It's my opinion the deceitful image knows a good deal more than he would like us to. When it's a case of which can take the other in, I'm open to bet on the nigger."

This was certainly true. Shotille knew he had sold both to his guests and another white man a forest that would be Okambo's presently. Still, even his knowledge was finite, and he did not know how soon there would be a forcible transfer of the property, nor that a ruse in warfare as old as the siege of Troy was being revived for his benefit. The canoes that approached up river contained more than merchandise.

No one said anything further, and Clarence leaned

moodily over the balustrade. It was hotter and darker than ever. Not a single ray of starlight now penetrated the murky atmosphere, and the fires had sunk to faint orange blurs. Even the voices of the bush were hushed, but Markham felt a sense of expectancy growing upon him. It seemed as if some danger drew nearer through the gloom.

Another hour passed. Cummings fidgeted, attempting strained pleasantries which missed fire, and Lyle grew nervously impatient until, when a distant beat of paddles stole out of the silence, he said, "Thank goodness, the canoes are coming. We shall hear something, and get back at last."

"There seem to be a good many of them," said Markham, and Shotille, rising, leaned out over the verandah as though listening intently.

Ten minutes dragged by, and as the splash and gurgle increased it became evident the flotilla was an unusually large one, while contrary to general custom no lusty paddling chanty accompanied the thud-thud of whirling blades. Then a challenge rang with sudden sharpness through the clammy mist: "Who comes up Shotille's river?"

There was no answer, though the listeners could hear the river parting more noisily before many bows and the thud of paddles plied faster than before.

"That's curious," said Lyle, feeling instinctively for the butt of his revolver. "Hallo! the sentry is hailing them again."

Next moment Shotille, bounding into the doorway, reappeared with an ivory horn, and a wailing blast trembled across the village. It was followed by drowsy voices, through which the answer to the second challenge, "Who comes up Shotille's river?" reached the white men. It was—"King Okambo!"

They stared towards each other through the blackness, and Clarence said, "I'm glad. Come at last—it's almost a relief."

Then there was general uproar, a clash and clatter of matchets, rattle of iron ramrods, confused shouting, and patter of naked feet, while unseen figures came running towards the headman's dwelling. Next, intermittent

flashes streaked the brushwood along the water front and fragments of broken cast-iron hummed overhead after each sputter of the overloaded gas-pipe guns. Shotille, who stood at the foot of the stairway, was shouting himself hoarse, but it was not evident that anybody heard or did his bidding. Then a long yellow flash leapt out and showed for part of a second the crest of the stockade, after which thicker vapour rolled into the mist, and building and forest trembled to the concussion of a heavy cast-iron gun. No second discharge followed it, but a crackle of firing broke out in the rear, and Markham, who had been trying to follow what was happening, said—

"That looks like treachery. Three gunners could have blown the whole flotilla out of the water. Okambo has evidently sent on a landing-party and turned their flank. By George, they've lined the whole backwater, and we're hemmed in. Bound to stand by Shotille and cut a way out with him."

"Keep still a few minutes," said Lyle. "Somebody will burn a hut first thing, and then we shall have light to see by. For your life—come in!"

A bright streak rent the darkness, there was a curious muffled roar, and close behind the spot where they had stood before one end of the headman's house fell in, sending up a cloud of dust and fragments. Shotille had waited too long, and now a traitorous artilleryman had turned one at least of his own guns upon him. Clarence dropped over the balustrade, and the others followed, for there was no stairway left, and found themselves mixed up in a tumultuous crowd brandishing flintlocks and matchets, in the midst of which Shotille's voice was audible. Then, as generally happens in such cases, somebody fired a hut, and a column of crackling fire leapt up, scattering showers of sparks which kindled a fresh blaze in the adjoining thatch. The red glare flooded the compound and flamed along the river, showing a solid body of almost naked men pouring in through the gate of the deserted stockade. Their matchets flared redly, and there was a confused twinkle of light on spear-points and the barrels of many guns. They howled like wolves as they broke into a trot, and through the roar of voices the word "Okambo!" was clear enough.

Flintlock guns sputtered intermittently among the huts, the acrid vapour of bad trade-powder thickened the mist, and there was a fresh patter of firing from the forest behind the village, towards which the mass of fugitives seemed gravitating. For a space the white men were borne forward among them, and as they worked their way through to the front Clarence found breath to say, "We shall have to fight for it, and it's a mercy the other side don't turn the guns upon us. There's absolutely no use trying to make a stand. Only thing possible is to break out through them."

Even this promised to be difficult. An excited negro can seldom be depended on to hit anything with a firearm in broad daylight, and very little damage had been done as yet. But a compact body of men came on with cold steel behind the fugitives, while another line fired with the negro's cheerful impartiality on friends and foes alike from what was now their front, where a narrow backwater cut them off from the forest. So the retreat grew slower, and Clarence, who had summed up the situation, said, "If those fellows try to stand they will be held between two fires, a mark even the niggers can hardly miss, or be cut up piecemeal among the huts. There's a detachment already traversing the guns. We must make Shotille head a rush."

Markham had learned a little of the bushman's tongue, Shotille, who had discarded his Belgian gun for a long-hafted spear, rather more English, and, because that wily heathen could, when forced to, fight stubbornly enough, between them they thumped and pushed their following into a faint semblance of several disorderly companies in echelon. Shotille grasped the fact that those behind could thus fire with a smaller risk of slaying the men in front.

"Get behind the second mob, Lyle!" roared Markham. "They're solid in front of us along the creek. Fire any guns that are loaded they will, so you may as well let them. When I've rammed my handful in, pile your rascals on top of us, and we should smash through Okambo's men. Savvy them thing, Shotille?"

"I savvy plenty," said the bush commercialist, a conspicuous figure in red and white cotton, gathering his

special bodyguard about him, and events and incidents succeeded each other rapidly during the next five or ten minutes.

The sputter of a straggling volley answered the assailants' yells, and Markham and Cummings ran forward on the flank of the first detachment of the charging mob. It was not their quarrel, but they must either help the rest to break the cordon or take their chance of annihilation with them. Therefore the former gripped a big revolver, and was quite prepared to use it if forced to. They were off, floundering over sweet potato trailers and yams, nobody apparently badly hurt as yet, though flashes still leapt out among the undergrowth which fringed the creek ahead. The pace quickened; hisses, whistles, and yells answered the shouts of Cummings, and the crash of guns from the rear as some fired while they ran. Then groups of black figures touched by the flickering glare of the burning thatch appeared among the underbrush, and the pace grew faster still.

Shotille was certainly not a coward, and ran agilely straight for the waiting foe a few yards before the rest, while the exhilaration bred by the clamour, beat of many feet, and shimmer of fire-lit steel, shook Clarence out of the state of dejection he had sunk into since he left Warrimba. He was in a distinctly dangerous mood. There was smoke close before them, black limbs, gun-barrels, and steel among the leaves, and how deep the creek beyond was he neither cared nor knew. While one man stood behind him he was going through.

He had not fired a shot as yet, and might not have done so but that twice a quick, whip-like crack rang out and a man beside King Shotille pitched forward screaming. Then in the brief interval preceding the shock of the assault Cummings roared, "That was Smithers who tried to shoot me. Under the bush yonder; I'm going to get him!"

It was only later that the reason for Smithers' presence appeared, and he was there very much against his will. Either partly stupefied with alcohol or recklessly determined to close accounts with Shotille, he had crawled into a good position for a shot at him. In any case, before

Markham could prevent it, his comrade leapt into the thicket, when again a revolver cracked, and Clarence saw two figures roll over among rustling leaves. Then he perceived nothing clearly during several seconds, for there was a howl and a shock, and while matchets and gun-barrels clashed about him he was hurled forward through a press of struggling bodies, dimly conscious that the stumpy revolver was jerking in his hand.

Next he saw less cumbered space ahead, and reeling down a slope found himself waist-deep in water, with Shotille and his bodyguard somewhere in front, while a great crackling and rustling showed that friends or enemies were bolting into or out of the forest clothing the opposite slope. The bushman is not fond of close fighting as a rule, but Shotille's followers had no choice. Neither did Okambo's flanking-party expect a rush, or they would doubtless have chosen the stronger position across the creek. Markham felt that he at least was safe, and floundering onwards gained the bank, where, looking behind him, he saw Lyle springing down the slope he had left, while, dripping and bareheaded, Cummings appeared unexpectedly behind him.

"That's the second time I've missed him," he gasped. "Half-a-dozen brutes fell over us just when I had my knee on him. I'm going back to look for the villain."

Markham, who grabbed the collar of his jacket, held on stubbornly until Lyle came up, and they hustled the protesting engineer into the forest between them. "It's a shameful waste of a good opportunity. That man will do us more mischief yet," he protested.

"Then you'll have to wait until he tries it," said Lyle, shaking the speaker savagely. "It is quite certain you're not going to waste precious minutes looking for him now. Are you hurt, Clarence? I came out scot free. Uncommonly thankful—rather more than I expected to!"

"No," said Markham; "there is not a scratch on me, and I saw very little personal damage done, in spite of all the shooting, but, though I scarcely remember using it, my revolver's empty. Cummings, there is apparently not much the matter with you."

"Only bad temper!" said the mechanic. "But there's

something the matter with Smithers unless I'm weaker than I used to be. I'd have brought him along a prisoner if you and the other fools hadn't stamped on me."

They broke away from the rest of the fugitives, pushing on in hot haste through networks of creepers, and, not without small injury, spiky pineapple leaves, until when the clamour of the pursuit, growing fainter, died away, Clarence said breathlessly, "Farewell Headman Shotille! It remains to be seen what his successor will do, and I'm inclined to fancy Okambo will demand settlement of the account already due. We'll go on again; I'm anxious about the camp."

Daylight was growing when, with garments as badly torn as the skin beneath them, and dripping from contact with dewy leaves, they limped into sight of the breastwork of Mahogany Camp. It was unmolested, but the wondering Kroos had heard the distant firing.

## XXIII

### THE LOOTING OF WARRIMBA

THE day following the flight of Shotille passed very slowly with the occupants of Mahogany Camp, and long before the sun had crossed the meridian the white men equally longed for and dreaded the end of it. The mist melted from the river, the swamps on the farther side ceased steaming, and the pitiless sunrays that yellowed the heavens beat down on the bare stretch of trampled mould, rendering tents and frail branch shelters alike uninhabitable. The trees that once covered it had been converted into currency by English timber salesmen, and, because Markham had chosen the position well, the camp crowned a low projection round which the river formed a bend.

A solid breastwork of mahogany logs afforded further protection, and was raised even higher with a thorn-laced stockade on the third side, behind which and beyond a

space sprinkled with huge stumps the forest stretched darkly in an unbroken wall. Clarence planned the defences. Cummings superintended their execution, and had also driven a narrow tunnel into the river under the breastwork to provide potable fluid.

"It's a tempting of Providence to imbibe that stuff. Dysentery, cholera, guinea-worm, and fever, just thick in every drop," he said. "Can't you see it's a warning—that a man has brains given him so he can make whisky? Only the wild beasts drink river-water."

No one ate more than a few mouthfuls of the noonday meal, which was perhaps as well, for provisions were very scanty, and as the sun passed west and one streak of shadow grew broader the trio lay thankfully within it.

"Okambo is too busy to trouble with us just yet," Lyle said. "He is either chasing Shotille or cleaning that rascal's village up, but it is tolerably certain we shall hear from him when he's ready. Meantime, all the creeks will be watched, and we couldn't get away if we wanted to, which of course we don't. Shotille has another den somewhere, hasn't he?"

Clarence raised his head languidly. He lay full length in the hot sand, with the rags of a cotton jacket barely covering his worn-out singlet, and the burnt skin peeling from his forehead. He was gaunt and emaciated, and the flesh had wasted from his bones. Responsibility, bodily suffering, hunger, scorching heat, and passion had left their mark on him, though, as he had heard in Shotille's village that a white officer had taken Florence and Mrs. Johnston down river, one anxiety at least was spared him. The others had changed less, for they had already contended with adversity and stress of climate, and Cummings had not suffered by a period of enforced abstinence.

"I heard so," Markham answered. "In that case I dare say he will make a better show. He was taken by surprise, or the result might have been different. I hope he will, for if Okambo has trouble to drive him out he will have less men to spare for us, and we shall have to hang like grim death on to the concession."

Cummings growled something inaudible, Lyle merely nodded. It was too hot to discuss any foregone conclusion,

though the prospect of a successful resistance was small. There were several dozen able-bodied Krooboys and other black men in camp whom Clarence had drilled into some proficiency with the matchet and obedience to command, beside a few sick ones, while how many hundreds Okambo could bring up against them he did not know. Neither did it greatly matter. They were pledged to hold the stockade against all comers or go down, and had almost decided it would be the latter.

The shadows stretched to the farthest breastwork and a breadth of the flaming river grew cool and dim when a large canoe, with six paddles thudding a-side, slid into hailing distance. A man waving a cotton rag on a branch summoned them to accompany him down stream into the fetich potentate's presence, bringing their weapons and property with them.

The request was promptly declined, and when the negro replied that Okambo would shortly cut every man's throat or give him alive to the snakes, Lyle, pitching up his rifle, fired a shot wide of the canoe. "Go away, you black brute, before we shoot you," he said drowsily, and added when the craft slid away stern-foremost, "Couldn't have him demoralising the Krooboys—see?"

"It's not quite orthodox," said Clarence. "Still, it was just as well. I feel better now that is settled, and hope he won't keep us waiting long."

Several more anxious days and nights dragged by, and still there was neither demonstration nor attack, only a tedious waiting which impaired the watchers' temper, scorching heat, and blinding glare. Then, as Markham and Lyle sat in the lighted tent, which stood out of reach of any charge of potleg fired from the forest, a Krooboy appeared in the doorway, saying, "Somebody lib for the bush."

They were out next moment, and, in a few more, dusky aliens clutching long flintlock guns and the white men repeating rifles waited for the newcomer behind the piled-up logs. There was no light of either moon or star on river or clearing, but all had learned to use their ears, and something that panted was breaking noisily through the undergrowth.

"That be dam-fool man," said a Krooboy who had

bagged coloured Customs officials in his time. "Muss be white man, sah."

Markham was startled at this, but a moment later slid his left hand further along the cool rifle-barrel as he caught a growl from Cummings: "If it's Smithers he won't escape me now."

The crackling sound drew nearer, and Markham could hear Cummings' jacket rub softly against the logs as he peered over, hugging his rifle. The same thought evidently struck them both, for Smithers had been seen among their enemies, and though they had no fear of him, Okambo's warriors were evidently to be dreaded. Very few Europeans can traverse the African forest without announcing their presence, but many of the naked tribes have learned as a matter of necessity to slide through its tangled recesses noiselessly, and there might be several score sable warriors behind the white man.

"If he's bringing Okambo's niggers I'll kill him before he crosses the breastwork," Cummings added in a low, savage whisper. "There; you can see something moving yonder. It is the infernal scoundrel, sure."

A moving blur of blackness slightly more solid than the night appeared close below, and a dozen muzzles were turned upon it, but Markham, who knew that another moment would seal the stranger's fate, laid his hand on Cummings' rifle. "We'll give him a chance for his life," he said.

Then he shouted, "Stand fast before we fire on you. Tell us what you want and who you are."

"Only a distressed white man—don't shoot!" the answer came back; and Markham, who recognised the voice, called out, "Put down your rifle, Cummings. It's Johnston of Warrimba. Hello! are there any niggers behind you?"

"No!" and the answer brought relief to the listeners, while when Lyle ran up with a lantern a weary man was dragged in over the breastwork and hustled by friendly hands into the tent, where he sat down on a deal case limply. He was draggled, muddy, and dejected, a pitiful spectacle, with a clotted rag wound round his head, and staring in surprise at Cummings, he said—

"It is a mercy I found you. We had—er—a difference with you, Mr. Seaton, and with your friend, but you will not refuse me shelter in my distress?"

Markham, who would have preferred any other visitor, answered with the best grace he could, "So long as you care to stay here you are welcome to our best, though that is but indifferent. We can sink our differences in times like the present, and I dare say Cummings deserved your displeasure as much as you considered I did. Lyle, could you find Mr. Johnston a little to eat?"

Johnston ate more than a little—in fact, Cummings watched him admiringly—and at length commenced his story.

"We were standing on the verandah stairway at Warrimba late at night, when, because the stars were bright, Hilary saw something that twinkled," he said. "Then there was a call like a curlew's repeated from the other side of the clearing, and Hilary, who knew what it meant, said, 'At last! I wonder if my people's blood will be required of me. Tell them to run for the isthmus quick, and if it is too late to gather behind me here.'" Then the speaker groaned as he added, "Ours was a heavy responsibility."

"You were not responsible for the niggers murdering each other. It seems to be their usual pastime," interposed Lyle; and Johnston answered, "No, though Hilary seemed to think so. He made himself responsible for everything, even the sickness, and would hardly be comforted when his patients died. 'If I had studied a little more I might have saved them,' he used to say. We were, however, responsible in this way. The Government officer couldn't take even the few people left us down river, and we debated whether we should tell them to go away. But they were outcasts or sick, and we knew the tribesmen, who hate our converts, might kill them in the bush. Besides, they were necessary to Warrimba."

"For the same reason that you turn a tame duck loose with a string to him, or a tin one painted, when you want to catch the wild ones," suggested Cummings; but Lyle kicked the speaker surreptitiously, saying, "Please ignore our friend's remarks. He doesn't wish to

offend you, but can't help talking foolishly. It's born in him!"

"The simile isn't a good one," continued the missionary. "We were fond of them, and Hilary hoped that, after all, the station might not be molested. We had never done harm to anybody. I warned the poor people in the huts and some got away, but when I was shouting into the entrance of one somebody struck me with a paddle, and when I fell down knelt on me. It was a terrible moment. His knees were very bony, and a second man held a matchet to my throat. But another beckoned to them, and they went away after beating me with a gun-butt cruelly. A man of my years and peaceful disposition feels such treatment very much."

"It is always most unpleasant, sir," said Lyle, with suspicious gravity, while Cummings, who grew red in the face, seemed to fizzle internally.

"Yes," said Johnston, "but we try to bear persecution patiently, and there was worse in store. One of them lighted a thatch, and, lying faint with pain, I could see the war boys run howling from hut to hut fighting over the plunder. They were more like fiends than men who are, after all, our brothers."

"Excuse the interruption," said Cummings. "But that is all rubbish, and I can't stand it. Cross the nigger with the Arab, and you get the makings of a man, even if he is a Mahomedan. I've had the dusky devils firing, but the rest of them——"

"Mr. Johnston is telling this story," said Markham; and Cummings subsided, panting with indignation.

"I saw my colleague," continued the missionary. "He was standing with empty hands on the verandah, and a few women and sick men behind him. A hundred misguided savages with matchets were clamouring below. One, howling like a wild beast, fired a flintlock gun, but another, who seemed a leader, cut him down with a matchet —it was horrible. I think Okambo must have given orders that we were not to be killed. I got up and tried to go to him, but couldn't make my voice heard, and my knees were shaky. My head swam, and the ground was heaving beneath me. The negroes swarmed about the foot of the

stairway, but Hilary raised his hands, and they fell back. The firelight shone upon him, and he looked very tall and commanding all in white, even to me, who knew him, more than human. It is a painful story, but the last few days have been trying, and it does me good to tell somebody."

The big Colonial patted his shoulder: "We are glad to listen, sir. From what my comrade told me he was a great man; " and Cummings broke in, "That is quite certain."

"I think," said Johnston, sighing, "they were afraid of him. He had a courage that is not given to many, and feared nothing that could hurt the body. So he held them back—one unarmed man against a hundred savages. Then just as I got near there was a rush and a roar, and Hilary was swept backwards across the verandah. I did not see what happened next, but presently, while they seemed to be tying our people with creepers in the rooms above, Hilary met me unhurt on the stairway. He asked if I was badly injured, and when I told him no, said, so far as I can remember, 'Because we are both alive now, it is probable that Okambo knows if he murders us the Government will, even should he prove too strong at present, remember it against him. But he will certainly sacrifice the prisoners, and I am going with them to prevent it.'

"Some of them were his subjects or runaway slaves," Johnston, apparently glad of a respite from the recollections, explained. "A horrible fate would overtake them, for the fetich priests have learned how to intensify mortal agony."

"When the Nimbi sacked Akassa they nailed a number of the prisoners into the canoes, and, I was told, made some of them eat portions of their comrades before they too were killed," said Markham. "It is hard to believe that the good-humoured black rascal one sees lounging along the water-side can positively revel in the most devilish cruelty."

"I said it seemed madness, but if he went I would go too," continued the missionary; "but Hilary said I must try to reach Shotille's village, borrow a canoe, and

take word to the armed steamers down river. Shotille might have helped us against Okambo. I don't know how long we discussed it, but Hilary always won his way, and the very negroes who mocked at him gave him a place in a canoe. 'It is necessary for you to do this. I do not know whose part is the more perilous, but you have your wife and I am a very lonely man,' he said. 'Good-bye, and do your best to help us, old friend. I do not know if we shall ever shake hands again.'

"He went away, and, sick and dizzy, I found a boy, whose leg was eaten by the Guinea-worm, hiding among the bananas, and managed to reach Shotille's town in a canoe—I hardly know how. The town was burnt down, and the boy could go no further. We found a poor wretch dying with a spear through him, and he told me there were three white men in the forest. It isn't fit to remember all one sees in Africa, and I can't tell you what we saw in the town. Something led me safely to your camp; it must have been the finger of Providence."

Johnston was silent for a few moments before he added, with ill-suppressed emotion, "Even now I do not know whether my poor comrade is alive or dead, and I wish he had taken my part instead. I seem to feel that he will never reach the station he loved again. We had given our best for Warrimba already, and one wonders how many more Africa will claim from us to kill with thirst and fever, or poison and the spear. The roll is over-long—but if we could only have kept—him. We had hoped for so much from Hilary."

Johnston gulped down something, coughed, and relapsed into silence, breathing heavily, and there was an interval before Markham said, "It is a legion of honour, and we sympathise with you. But if the end must come, could he have made a better—venturing, alone and unarmed, for the sake of those who trusted him, into the devil priests' country? I am afraid at times we all misjudge you, and am sorry, since we have seen you at your work. Nobody who knew him could refrain from respecting the Reverend Hilary Legh."

"I never met a finer man," said Cummings gravely.

"It seems to me we have quite forgotten one thing," interjected Lyle. "Our guest has an ugly gash on his head, and it's about time somebody saw to it. If you will allow me I'll try to fix it for you, sir. Clarence should also have made it plain to you that it is perfectly impossible for you to deliver your message. The river is boomed above and below, and niggers with flintlocks are watching every path. In short, however much you want to, you can't get away. How you got in I don't quite know."

The missionary submitted meekly to Lyle's surgery. He was not a man of brilliant qualities, though his lot might have worn out a much stronger one, and the listeners' sympathy had apparently comforted him. Before an hour had gone he was sleeping peacefully, and Markham stood wrapped in waterproof beside the stockade keeping his vigil. A little hot breeze sighed among the mahoganies, and somewhere in the darkness the river sang to him. The forest was black and sombre, an abode of terror, but the oily water slid onwards ever, past reeking quagmire and shadow that never lifted, to the clean heave of Atlantic beyond the smoking bar. The knowledge suggested vague thoughts and similes which were comforting.

Next day the siege commenced in earnest. The camp was fired on from long range by daylight, and naked men, silent as serpents, crawled within rushing distance of the stockade at night. Few of them ever passed it, and these perished suddenly, but as the days swelled into weeks the half-famishing defenders, who had seen their steamer sunk, found their munitions running out, and would have starved altogether but for the assistance of Johnston, who was a genius at making the most of the commissariat. He would also load rifles and clean them at crucial times, and, so Clarence discovered, give a portion of his one daily meal to the Krooboys when he could do so unobserved. Once during a sortie three of Shotille's subjects, who had sought refuge, managed to get away with messages they had promised to convey to the coast, but the garrison hardly expected them to reach it.

## XXIV

### EVELINE TAKES ACTION

HIGH up among the fire-rent peaks of Grand Canary a green valley winds through a Plutonic waste of scoriæ. This much-vaunted island for the most part resembles a gigantic cinder-heap hove steeply aloft from the lower depths of cerulean seas which are flecked with snowy incandescence by the rush of the North-east Trades. There are, however, verdant spots of surpassing loveliness, into some of which even the enterprising tourists, whose customs and attire fill the swarthy hill peasants with wonder, rarely venture, and the lava-walled Barranco Espantoso is one of these.

Eveline Lonsdale lounged therein one bright morning, on the terrace of the Quinta del Pinar. She lay, with hands crossed idly, in a steamer chair, a cluster of crimson roses in the breast of her white dress, and broad straw hat pushed back from her hair, which sparkled where the glaring light touched it. More roses nodded above her on the trellis, and she glanced meditatively across tall, green sugar-cane towards the foam of a watercourse where dark-skinned lavanderas were apparently pounding some of her own light dresses into fragments against the boulders. Then, as she lifted her eyes, it was not the weird panorama of volcanic peaks that caught her gaze, but, seen through a rocky gateway draped with tufts of palms, the vast blue plain of the Atlantic, three thousand feet below. Across it, perhaps a hundred miles away, stretched the western shores of Africa.

Straightway she forgot the roses, and it was in vain the orange trees, distilling heavy fragrance, shook down snowy petals upon her and tossed the green and golden fruit among their glossy leaves. She was dreaming of dismal mangroves and foul lagoons rolled in steam. A clatter of hoofs startled her, and she rose when an olive-faced man, strangely picturesque with heavy Witney blanket rolled about his shoulders, ragged sombrero, and bare brown feet showing through the open sandals, led

up a horse bred behind Juby on the Sahara coast and a mule of Andalucía. Eveline was fond of all dumb creatures, and the mule's wicked eyes grew innocent as she stroked his glossy coat.

"Mucho cuidado, señorita!" said the man warningly. "This is good mule, but to some peoples antipático. Puede ser, he bite big piece out of you."

Eveline was not timid, and she laughed heartsomely as the beast rubbed its head against her. "He wouldn't bite me," she said. "The horse has a few good points, too; but in the first place it is—quanto? How much do you want for them, Antonio?"

This was too direct a question for the loquacious Canario, who leaned gracefully against an orange tree, and with a respectful "Su permiso, señorita!" lighted a cigarette at a paper match. Then for several minutes he went into the beast's genealogy, which was doubtless invented, before proceeding indirectly towards the point: "I am muy pobre, señorita—very poor man, with ten little children, and the mules all gone. Ay de mi! the work it is all day to win the little pesetilla. Si, señorita; one peseta and a halfa."

The man was a picture of contented indolence, and Eveline laughed as she said, "You certainly look industrious. That is about a shilling. Ten little children! Dear me. However do you feed them?"

"The good saints feed them for me," answered the man in Castilian. "The señorita fails to comprehend. She has the face of an angel, but she is a heretic."

"And it is lawful to charge a heretic double?" said Eveline, who comprehended a little. "Now to business, Antonio, and listen to me. I know something about horses, and that one is——"

The Spaniard fumed under a pitiless enumeration of all the beast's defects, and two people watched the speaker admiringly from the cool shadow of a palm on the edge of the sugar-cane. One was the youthful Mr. Dane, who, having ridden eight dusty miles from Las Palmas for a sight of Eveline, was now making the most of the opportunity. Red roses, oleanders, and glossy leaves formed a fitting relief for the shapely figure in the thin white

dress. Breeze and sun had deepened the carmine warmth of the cheeks, leaving the milk-white forehead unscathed. He noted how the hair rippled above it as though burnished and the light in the laughing eyes.

Dane was very boyish in all his ways, and Hilda Markham, who had long known him, looked down on his sunburnt face with a pitying smile from the hammock she swung in.

"You are very poor company, Charlie," she said. "During the last twenty minutes you have not spoken a word to me. I am not jealous, but sorry for you. There is no use longing for the moon, you foolish boy."

The youth, for he was only a man in sturdy frame, positively blushed, but Miss Markham was a confidante of his, and he said awkwardly, "Even if you guessed right, that is better than raking in the mud, isn't it? And—well, perhaps, though one ought not to say so, there might be a little hope for me some day."

"No," said Hilda, half-amused, and slightly compassionate. "Not even a very small one, Charlie. How many times have I wasted valuable advice for your benefit, and, like the bitter medicine I once remember watching with much interest the nurse give you, a little common-sense talking would be good for you. Eveline is in several ways years older than you, and by the time you have done some work in the world you might no longer think her even pretty. I do not mean it arithmetically. It will be only a man of experience, and a strong one, she will listen to. But really, Charlie, is this either civil or fair?"

"I couldn't help it," said Dane, with a doleful fervency which approached the ridiculous. "Do something!—I am longing for the opportunity. Of course, as you hinted, I'm a fool, but for all that I would ask nothing better than to spend years trying just to please Eveline. It would not matter if she never even thanked me!"

Hilda smiled upon him, saying, "You will find a cure some day, Charlie, and it will do you no harm to continue in that frame of mind meantime. Now we will go and help them at their bargaining."

When they approached the pair the Spaniard was in

the middle of an ornamental sentence: "The saints have given the señorita sense as well as beauty and riches. All the English are rich, but many are foolish."

"I wish they were," said Hilda with a sigh. "Ask him how he knows it, Charlie," and there was a dialogue in Castilian, defective on both sides, until Dane translated—

"Everybody knows the English are rich. Don't they eat all day in the big hotels down there, and give everybody money? But when the bill comes the Englishmen swear. Those who go south in the steamers drink all there is in the cafés, and after breaking many chairs return to their ship in two-horse tartanas—not more than three of them in the bottom of each tartana. When we have one horse, it drags eight or ten. I have seen them often singing very strangely and fighting with sticks!"

"He is a horrid man," said Hilda, frowning; but Eveline broke in, "It is just as well to know how other people appreciate the national character, and he really is not very far wrong. Now, Antonio, I am not going to buy mules or horses without trying them. Put them in Reina's stable and come back to-morrow."

The Canario departed, and Eveline found Northop Markham sitting alone under the palmettos in the patio. He had come out partly because that island was well on the way to Africa, and because there were reasons why he did not wish to be seen on the exchanges for a few weeks, as well as to visit his family. He was perusing a bundle of papers delivered by the last mail, and looked careworn.

"I am going to buy a horse, or perhaps a mule," she said. "So please sign this cheque, and then when I make my mind up I can cash it in Las Palmas."

"Why don't you hire them?" asked Markham, with an abstracted air; and Eveline, affecting imperiousness, said, "You are not to ask troublesome questions, but just fill in your name. Before we go home I can sell them again, and, if you insist upon it, pay back the money. There is nothing so interesting as a horse deal."

Markham's mind was troubled about many things that day, and he appended his signature to the one already there. It only remained for Eveline to fill in the amount and name of payee to convert the slip into negotiable paper.

It was dusk when, as she sat with Hilda and Dane outside the quinta looking down on the twinkling lights of the port and great darkening sea plain, a beat of hoofs rang in dull reverberations up the shadowy barranco. They could hear it drawing nearer and nearer from far down in the valley, but none of the party knew it was weighty news the rider brought them. Afterwards two of them long remembered the "clink-clank" of iron on lava. A dusty man reined in his horse close beside them, and held up an envelope, saying, "Telegrafo. Don Manuel say you give two dollar for bring him with expedition."

Northop Markham came out bareheaded, seized the envelope, dropped several coins into the brown hand and disappeared, while Hilda said, "Poor daddy! Another wretched cablegram to worry him."

Dane strolled towards the stables, and the two girls were left together to watch the stars blink out behind the splintered peaks, and rejoice in the delicious coolness of the mountain air, while in the room behind them the father of one sat with brows wrinkled down over his eyes, and dismay in his heart, turning over a private telegraph code. Hilda's comment fell short of the fact. Markham was not only worried, but almost desperate, as he deciphered the message.

"Clarence hemmed in. Okambo. Situation serious. Immediate action necessary. Come. Bring launch. Impossible to obtain goods of the description here. Native rising imminent, and administrative authorities unable to render assistance. Heron," it ran.

All Markham's messages came in cipher, and the meaning was plain to him, but it was otherwise with the remedy. He took a folded sheet of paper from his pocket-book and groaned, for he could see an expedition would be necessary, and the statement from his book-keeper showed no funds available. In fact, it was evident the latter found great difficulty in keeping within bankers' limits. And if Clarence lost the concession, utter ruin waited him. He could see no way of raising further money, and feeling as though he would choke inside he went out shakily into the open air. Markham had faced

imminent disaster several times during his career, but defeat appeared certain now.

"What is the matter, father? I hope you have not had bad news. Is Clarence well?" said Hilda, who met him in the doorway; and Markham answered, "It could hardly be worse. You are a brave girl, and may as well know now as later, while your mother cannot return from Teneriffe for a week at least, and so I shall not see her. Clarence and his party are hemmed in by hostile tribesmen, and at the least may lose the concession we all depend upon. I must go out at once and try to help them, but I need a powerful launch, or rather small steamer, and how to get it I don't know."

"I don't understand, father," said Hilda; and Markham answered hoarsely, "There is no time to bring one from England, and if I purchased from the coaling companies here the price would be exorbitant. It is only just possible for my manager to scrape through, and a cable to him for money would precipitate a crisis. I pledged the concession for a loan, and unless repayment is made in a certain time will lose it. The telegraph offices are shut now, and I have until to-morrow to consider, but a steamer I must have. Your brother's life may depend on it."

Markham passed on, and Eveline, who caught every word of the explanation as she slipped away, could hear his footsteps across the sugar-cane from where she sat hidden beside the frothing watercourse. She wanted time and solitude to think, and at first two facts only presented themselves. If Clarence was in peril his comrades must also be, and among them the man it seemed her careless words had sent to his death in Africa. She shuddered as she recalled them, and resolved that he should not die. Then Markham, to whom she owed a debt of gratitude, was in sore trouble, and by helping him she could help the other—but Markham would take no help from her. He was hard as granite when his pride was touched, and she stretched out her hands with a helpless gesture towards the darkness.

"What tempted me to try you that autumn day, loyal heart? But you were over-considerate—and I was proud," she said.

High above the jagged peaks loomed in fire-rent majesty, and the splash of the little torrent made music in the silence beneath them, but there was no inspiration in that silence, and, as many maidens had done before, Eveline sighed for the simple words left unsaid. Until a hint of danger came, and even afterwards, she had been content to let the man she trusted prove his worth. Steamship and swift electric message bound him and others on the outer edge of the Empire to those they left behind, but now the hiss of a poisoned arrow or flash of a flintlock gun might open between them a great gulf which nothing that man could make might span.

Then suddenly, by means of a trifle, the inspiration came. She leaned against a boulder, and there was a rustle as a strip of paper thrust there with careless indifference crumpled in her pocket. She snatched it out next moment and clutched it fast. It no longer represented the value of a horse, but the price of a brave man's life, and here was a full solution of the difficulty. The cheque became suddenly very precious, and wrapping it in a handkerchief she thrust it for security into the breast of her dress, blushed for some reason at the slight pressure, and then struggled for composure, for it was necessary to think again. Fortune further favoured her, for Dane passed behind the bananas leading his horse, and rising hastily she said to him—

"Will you do me a great favour, Charlie? I want you to meet me riding into Puerto Luz to-morrow. I shall start at eight o'clock, taking the Tamaracife bridle-path."

"There is nothing in the world I wouldn't do if you asked me," Dane said fervently, and Eveline did not check his exuberance as she had done on previous occasions. Then, while the young man rode exultantly down the barranco, she returned to the quinta, and, drawing details from Hilda, condoled with her. "You must not lose hope, dear," she said. "Somehow, when one is almost desperate the turn comes. Remember I have the gift of prophecy, and I can't help predicting there will be good news for you."

Hilda looked at her with half-formed suspicion, and a question in her eyes; then dejectedly took up the sewing

she pretended to occupy herself in. Eveline's predictions had certainly proved correct hitherto, but she doubted the present one.

Eveline lay awake all night with the blank cheque beneath her pillow, and if she was not so fresh as usual next morning Dane, who met her riding through a desolation of dust and ashes, noticed only that her face was eager and her tone more than usually kind as she said—

"Charlie, I want you to help me to-day, and there is nobody else who can. I wish to buy the finest steam launch in this harbour."

The young man's satisfaction was very manifest, but he also looked puzzled. "I will do my best to help you, but whatever can you want a launch for, Miss Lonsdale? They are all large craft here, and cost a good deal of money."

Eveline reined in the mule, which laid back its ears and bared its teeth when Dane would have grasped the bridle. "Is it necessary for me to explain my reason when I ask a favour?" she asked. "There will be no trouble about the money."

"No," said Dane contritely. "I am sorry. If you want to buy all the launches please count upon my help."

"That is better!" said Eveline, smiling. "As a reward I will trust you. Well, there are several white men hemmed in by savages somewhere up an African river, and a fast steamer is needed to bring them succour. Perhaps I am injudicious, but I know you will keep a secret if I ask you. The man who sent them out cannot, I believe, obtain the necessary money immediately."

"Please don't tell me any more," Dane broke in. "I know you don't like it—and from what Hilda said I can guess the rest. Miss Lonsdale, I would—you can count on my carrying out your commands blindly. Please don't think it's a condition—but would you do me a favour, too? When that launch goes out to Africa I wish to join her crew. I know you can persuade Mr. Markham if you want to."

Eveline looked down on him with some compunction and much approval. She was, as Hilda Markham said, in several ways beside the comparatively small difference

in age many years older than he, but his wholehearted proffer of service was pleasant nevertheless.

"It is a deadly country, Charlie," she said; "a pestilential land of shadow, where white men find their graves. Not many in battle—but in squalid monotony, worn down by fever. It would be cruel to send you there."

"I am not a boy, and though Hilda laughs at me you never do," said Dane, and in point of physique this was certainly true, though he still retained a refreshing ingenuousness. "I—I want to go. I even felt tempted to make a bargain with you, but that would have been mean, you know. Still, there are no relatives to worry about me, and if you won't help me I shall buy a ticket for the first steamer and meet Mr. Markham there."

Eveline looked serious. She had met many as young whose assumption of languid, pessimistic indifference to everything made her, so she said, inclined severely to shake them. Dane was of course absurd, and yet she liked his very absurdity. She was very gracious when she answered, "I will never laugh at you. And if I cannot persuade you from it you shall go. Now the sooner we get to work the better."

Dane was not a fool, if over-sentimental, and began his work judiciously by escorting Eveline to the Fonda Catalina, which looks out across the bay, and then visiting a young British engineer who served the harbour extension contractors. They had struck up a friendship with each other.

"It's as well you came to me," said the engineer. "The coaling people would sell you a launch or anything down to a wax candle provided they could make a big enough profit out of you, and if you dealt with them unassisted they'd certainly do the latter. They generally have a stand-by steamer—sell them to the Spanish authorities occasionally—and there's a powerful and comparatively new one hauled out for painting now. But whatever does the lady want a launch for?"

"That is her own business," said Dane quietly.

They spent several hours examining the hauled-up craft, and the engineer another haggling with the coaling company's manager, who was open to sell anything short

of the big wharf, which belonged to the Spanish Government, at a profit. Thanks to the former's professional experience, the profit was not exorbitant. Then Dane considered again, and finding an English local merchant with whom he had improved an acquaintance initiated by letters of introduction, brought him and Eveline down in a lurching two-horse tartana into the filthy port.

Eveline filled in the amount agreed upon, and it was a large one, then, changing colour, bit her lips as the manager said, "This is on an English bank, madame, and you will excuse me, but I am bound to be careful—my position depends on it. Cheques are out of favour in these islands without a guarantee."

Eveline felt it was cruel to be thwarted when almost at the goal, but Dane said quickly, "I had expected this, and that is why I brought Mr. Farquharson."

Farquharson regarded the manager ironically. He was agent for a line of steamers which ran up a heavy fuel bill. "You're getting very cautious in small things of late," he said. "As cautious as you are in the number of bags to the ton. This is the signature of Markham the palm oil merchant. Anybody in the African line offices will tell you about him. The other's a well-known lawyer—I've looked him up. If you like I'll guarantee, but that cheque's a good deal safer than a certain contract you took recently."

"Well, if you say so," answered the manager, who winced at two of the references. "I'll tell my people to float the craft off as the tide makes," and the party withdrew, Dane and Farquharson proceeding to the steamship offices. An African boat lay rolling just inside the breakwater, and the agent contracted to heave on board the launch, which was a powerful sea-going craft of some tonnage, and deliver her in the Silver River for a certain sum at owners' risk. When Dane rejoined Eveline at the Fonda Catalina he had the bill of lading in his pocket.

Eveline enjoyed the dinner there in spite of her outdoor toilet, and the ride home, when they climbed from the long heave of shimmering ocean towards the black peaks which towered in solemn grandeur under the moon, even more. They drew rein at the mouth of the barranco, and

Dane pointed to something which, twinkling like a star, passed slowly seaward far beneath. "That's the masthead light of the African boat going out with your steamer safe on board," he said.

Dane led his beast towards an aqueduct, and Eveline rode on, satisfied. She had done all that lay in her power, and as yet the consequences did not trouble her. Her courage, however, commenced to fail when the lights of the quinta drew near, and she prepared for the meeting with Markham senior. He was busy with another telegraphic message when she walked into his retreat alone, feeling like a child who had merited and was about to receive castigation.

"I have done something that will make you very angry, but I am not in the least sorry, and it cannot be undone now," she said. "So, without excuses, I am going to confess it. Here is a receipt for and particulars of a powerful steel steamer, beside a bill of lading consigning the same to the order of agent Heron on the Silver River. I believe that is the correct phraseology, though there was a good deal about pirates, acts of God, and barratry. It was duly paid for with the blank cheque."

Markham dropped the papers handed him, and rising sharply thrust back his chair. Few of his business acquaintances had seen him show much emotion, but now his face was red to the temples, and Eveline trembled a little.

"Do you know that you have disgraced me for ever?" he said. "Can you not understand that I am your trustee, and this is practically a misappropriation of your property? What can my colleague do but conclude that I have taken advantage of the position? Evie, you the little girl I used to nurse, I never expected this blow from you."

Eveline was paler than usual, but she answered the question with another: "Had you any scheme that would have enabled you to purchase a steamer immediately?"

Markham paced across the room before he answered, "I had not, but——" and Eveline checked him.

"You had not! Then listen to me. Would anybody who knows you dare ascribe anything dishonourable to you? And if they did? You sent out these men, one

of them your own son, to do a very dangerous work. Dare you sacrifice them to avoid the risk of a passing suspicion? Woman's reasoning, you say! I'm thankful it is. We do not count every consequence when trouble threatens those who trust us, and I know what is done openly in your markets. Had you even forced the gift from me few would have blamed you."

"No man is responsible for his neighbour's roguery, nor will that excuse his own," said Markham, still very grimly.

"Then," said Eveline, "which is the better? To break faith, a very solemn obligation, with starving men who have served you too faithfully, or let one or two strangers blame you undeservedly? The first course is impossible. But talking is useless. The launch is bought and shipped, and it only remains for you to repay me on opportunity. You are under no obligation to me. It is the best use I have ever made of my money. But you must tell nobody."

"You are right. Talking is certainly useless now," said Markham, softening. "But it is a very bitter pill. Still, for my boy's sake, and the sake of those who stood by him—God bless you for your kind heart, Evie."

Then it was that Eveline lost her composure and sank into a chair. The pill was also, for a reason not greatly different from the merchant's, a bitter one to her, and Markham, who saw trouble in her face, bent over her. "You will forgive me for anything like harshness, Evie," he said gently. "To think that the tiny, bright-haired girl who used to ride on my shoulder such a very little time ago should outwit me! But never imagine I was ungrateful. How could any man placed as I was ever forget such a service? Again I say, God bless you—and in the meantime the secret is safe with me."

Eveline had now to face what she dreaded most, and it was with an effort she answered, "Please don't—my desire to help you should be plain enough, and any other surmise will prove erroneous. Now you must let me go, but you will promise to take young Mr. Dane out with you. It was he who helped me, and I pledged myself to ask you."

Markham asked a few questions, then stooping kissed the girl on the forehead as she held out her hand to him, and hardly had she vanished than Dane came in.

"You are the young man who assisted Miss Lonsdale to circumvent the legal guardian of her property?" he said grimly.

"I am, sir, or rather it was I, and not Miss Lonsdale, who arranged the whole affair," the other answered without flinching.

Markham found it hard to restrain an approving chuckle, but he managed it. "And why did you do so?"

"Because I would do a great deal to help Clarence or the man who went out with him," said Dane with a composure he himself wondered at, for he knew the Markham temper. "Even venture to incur your displeasure, sir."

"Ah!" said Markham. "I have known you for a long time. Knew your father before you—may I say that I never thought you had so much in you? And you are anxious to go to Africa. What do you suppose the necessary qualifications are?"

"I don't know," was the answer. "Will you mention one or two?"

"Yes," said Markham drily. "Implicit obedience, a capacity for working hard on a very empty stomach, getting shot at without firing back, and handling black men so that they never suspect a weakness when you're deadly sick, as you probably will be. Do you still want to go?"

"I would do my best, sir," and Dane straightened himself. "Other men have done all that—I knew two of them. I still want to go!"

"Then," and Markham brought his hand down on the young man's shoulder, "go you shall. You are very like your father, Charlie—and he was one of the staunchest men I knew. I hardly think he would blame me for taking you."

## XXV

### IN PERIL OF THE SEA

THERE was some excitement among the older commercialists—though these were not numerous—in the sweltering town of Lagos when a whisper went round

that Northop Markham had come back to Africa. A black trader of repute testified that he had seen him sauntering at dusk down the Marina, looking in the dim light much the same as he had done many years earlier. It was also found on inquiry that he spent the night at a certain hotel and departed early on the little branch steamer which transhipped cargo down the coast, taking with him two white men who had lost caste and made a living by carrying out risky ventures for merchants who took the profit. They had been comrades of Markham's once. The movements of the party, augmented by several dusky Mahomedans, had afterwards been traced until they landed in a river mouth, where, however, they vanished.

"It's no good worrying ourselves as to what they're after. Markham's not the man to make his intentions public until he's sure of success," said one who knew him. "He has got a hard crowd with him, and I wouldn't take a big fee from the opposition to run up against them. Black Pete at the hotel said he looked savage, too."

It was some time later when one night Northop Markhame, Dane, and the two outcast adventurers sat talking with agent Heron in his factory.

"I had been expecting you, sir," said the latter. "The launch, and she's a splendid vessel, has steam up ready. I've packed her with provisions, and picked out a few staunch boys for you. It's as well you came in quietly, but you must have had a pretty hard journey, and I'm afraid there's a worse in store, if you're going in Sewin's way. Very heavy surf along the coast, and the glass indicates a tornado."

Heron flung the casement open, and the distant roar of breakers vibrating across the forest filled the room. "Been blowing hard on shore for a week on end," he continued. "Wind dropped suddenly at noon to-day, and that's suspicious. The seas will be behind you, but it's forty miles of open water before you can run into the creek."

Markham leaned on the table, looking—for hitherto he had carried his years well—unusually old, but his voice hinted at unabated energy as he said, "I have found out I'm not so young as I used to be, but if hell were let loose out yonder it wouldn't stop me, and we ought to

find our way through by Clarence's chart. You soon decided it would be no use negotiating with the authorities."

"Absolutely none!" said Heron. "They're concentrating their whole energies on an expedition to smoke out Okambo's stronghold, though most of us are doubtful if they'll ever get through. The swamps are particularly impassable."

One of the two adventurers laughed silently before he said, "Brave old authorities! They must have the full procession. Steamers, canoes, endless tons of lumber, and an army of carriers, besides scouts and advance parties to let the niggers know just how they're coming a month beforehand. They cut down a whole forest to get at the last fellow. You and I and Crawshay, Markham, would bring back Okambo handcuffed with a twentieth of their men."

Heron looked at the speaker admiringly. He knew this was no idle boast, for these were men who had long dealt with and occasionally coerced forest potentates who still mocked at the flag. "You did great things in the old days," he said. "But confound it, here's somebody coming just when we don't want them."

A splash of oars grew louder, and the agent added, "It's that young idiot Wilkinson from the Amalgamation factory. Fortunately, however, he doesn't know any of you."

A few minutes later the youthful agent, followed by a negro bearing something rolled in a blanket, came in, and Heron said, "Gentlemen with some tropical experience, who are going inland to look for new openings. I'm provisioning them."

"Wish you good luck!" said Wilkinson with a nod of condescension, and a critical stare at Dane for which the latter longed to assault him. "One of them very young. You'll be ten years older if ever you come down again. I've been up to the Consulate, Heron, about our man Smithers. The fool has been missing for some time, and I'm afraid Okambo has got him. There'll be a drought in the rascal's camp if he has. Took this ice up for Major Carwardine, but he's away inspecting the flotilla, and they've sent us a beautiful man from Calabar instead. Told him to send a steamer up at once and

find Smithers, and he put up an eyeglass and looked at me through it as if I were a natural curiosity. 'Yes,' I said, 'I want a steamer sent immediately.'"

"What did he say?" asked Markham with a show of interest, and smiled drily when Wilkinson proceeded to mimic the answer of the officer, who, it seemed, had been amused by him.

"'Young gentleman of considerable assurance. Traders intolerable nuisance, always making trouble—can't do anything. No business—ah—whatever to go up there when he was told not to. Would require a full Yoruba company, and we can't spare them. Make a memo. of it to report upon.'

"I told him some fellows earned their pay easily, and he said he was too busy to go into that," continued Wilkinson; "so I came away, thinking I'd give the ice to you. You're not a bad sort, Heron, if you didn't serve Markham, and when he goes under I'll recommend you. Christian showed me a letter from his chum, the secretary's stenographer, and our people at home have got Markham by the neck. Hope you'll get your salary before they choke the life out of him."

Here the speaker turned towards Markham as he concluded, "When you next want anything buy at an Amalgamation factory. Heron is the honestest of Markham's crowd, but he's not above suspicion, and it's my opinion he poisoned the last party. Anyway, they were never seen again after spending two days with him."

"Thank you," said Heron's employer grimly. "Your name is Wilkinson, isn't it? I'll try to remember you."

There was a burst of laughter when the young agent went out with a jaunty air, and Heron said, "You see the kind of men they send out to break us up with, sir. It's one of the advantages of syndicate management. Still, he confirms what I said about the authorities, and even if they didn't demand Clarence's surrender as a prisoner they might veto your project. You heard what he said, and if his folks are selling freely they're not buying here. Grease is accordingly dirt cheap, but though I've plenty trade goods it hardly seems wise to store."

"Continue as before," said Markham. "Buy every

puncheon of oil you can get at a bargain until you clear your barter goods out."

It was late when the little steel steamer lurched out of the Silver River and into a chaos of creaming surf that tumbled athwart the channel, for her impatient crew had been forced to wait until the rising tide rendered the growling bar practicable.

Markham held the tiller himself, and a chart in a glass case lay close beside him. It was, however, useless, for hammered sand-spit and straggling palms ashore formed only dim blurs of white and blackness, while the way the craft flung herself on end would have prevented the most practised eye obtaining much information from it. As yet an outshore shoal partly sheltered the river mouth, and with engines clanging hard the steamer plunged swiftly through a smother of phosphorescent flame that whirled high in many-coloured scintillations each time her bows went down. The sea was filled with fire, and swift streaks of steely light flamed far off athwart the broad breast of the Atlantic, showing for a moment a long succession of frothing crests which vanished again suddenly into inky gloom.

"Not much wind as yet," said one of the men from Lagos. "Still, the sea's running heavy, and I'd edge her out for open water. Those fireworks aren't let off for nothing, and Heron's aneroid fell several tenths while I watched it. Something uncommonly awful is certainly coming."

As he spoke, the steamer, which had drawn clear of the shelter, swung giddily aloft, and there was a great burst of fiery spray beneath her counter. Then she surged forward with a boiling mass of sea-flame piled above either rail. It curled in across the fore-deck, and streamed aft among the crouching black men, to pour splashing over the coaming into the well. The propeller whirled noisily in free air, and there was a rattle of runaway engines, which brought up with a bang when the quivering hull swooped into the depths of the succeeding hollow.

"Sea's higher than I expected," said Markham, shaking the brine from his oilskins. "Start the pump, Crawshay. We mustn't let the water gain on her."

It was long since the merchant had handled a launch, but he had learned the art in early days, when fewer ocean vessels called along the surf-swept coast. Now it was with satisfaction he felt that his fingers had not lost their skill with the tiller after much use of the pen, and with a trace of his former joy in physical effort he waited for the conflict that would surely come.

The seas grew longer and steeper as the steamer drew out from the land, but they curled less sharply, and it was only at intervals the crest of one foamed in across the counter aft, or, lurching wildly, the craft shipped two feet of seething brine over her depressed rail. There was a growl from the negroes as some of them, who had not clung to the stanchions in time, washed spluttering along the inclined deck. The pump clanked on steadily, and now and then the whole hull rattled when, hove up with dripping quarters high above the sea, the engines ran away.

"You laid your hands on a fine craft, Charlie," said Markham. "Most of the launches I used to run would have filled up, and left us swimming on the bar, but she has made a fast passage of it hitherto. You will, however, see a difference very shortly. Tell him to get the side hatches over the well and aft of the fires, Crawshay."

It was done, and a blue flame that fell from the zenith showed for a second the naked black figures bolting down the stout wooden covers which extended from the side decks right up to the boiler casing, after which the white men were penned close together in one narrow opening astern, and Crawshay was hidden as he crouched beside his engines. When Dane crawled in to watch them the man's face was anxious as he filled the brass oil cups.

"She's running sweetly, and I'm thankful," he said. "All our lives will depend on that cylinder doing its work well before the next half-hour is past. By George, she has shipped an extra heavy one."

There was a heavy thud, a roar and rush of fluid along the deck above; the floorings seemed to rise up to the vertical, and a deluge poured down through every crevice in the movable hatches. It drenched Dane to the skin, a cloud of steam from the boiler sheathing nearly blinded him, and he fell over backwards, clutching at his com-

panion, while shovels, axes, iron bars, and fuel rolled down on them. When he wriggled clear the bright cylinder head flamed dazzlingly, and the shallow pit they crouched in seemed filled with fire, before whose brilliancy the red twinkle from the furnace door grew dim. It went out, and left him temporarily sightless, while for a space all sense of hearing was deadened by a tremendous volume of sound. This also ceased, and Dane became aware that he was kneeling in water, while the thump of engines and clamour of the sea recommenced as it were at a distance, and a voice he scarcely recognised beat in upon his ears. "Run your pump faster. Rip up the floorings and heave some of the water out by hand."

Somebody flung Dane a bucket, and crawling from under the hatch he lowered it through an opening in the floorings. It was not easy to fill, because the water surged to and fro, and worse to empty, for a mad lurch flung him against Markham, who clenched the tiller and received most of the contents over him. Blaze after blaze of lightning rioted athwart the heavens, and Dane caught fragmentary glimpses of the wet, white faces about him. Speech was impossible, however, for the thunder rolled in deafening reverberations across the waters, and he made out that the negroes were lying flat on the sluicing deck just forward of the thwartship ledge, which turned off the brine in cataracts out through either rail.

Then the rain came, thrashing the sea into whiteness and beating the ridged crests flat. It rattled like grape-shot along the hammered deck, until the black men lay face downwards while it lashed their naked bodies, and even the protected flesh of the Europeans quivered under its impact. It came down in solid rods. This did not last long, however, for the tremendous deluge was whirled away to give place to the wind. A blast swept down with a wicked scream after a growling thunder roll, and the sea was lifted and rent apart by it. The launch listed sharply until her deck was buried deep on one side and a mass of froth and foam drove, a solid sheet of whiteness, over the other elevated rail, while Markham's voice broke very faintly through the unearthly shrilling, "Cram your furnace, Crawshay. More steam!"

"Got to make your decision now," said the other man in wind-cut gasps. "Heave her to, or run. When the sea once piles up it will be impossible to bring her round, and it might swallow her running before it."

"It might also swallow her lying head-to," shouted Markham. "It's a fair wind, and I'm going to drive her before it."

He did not add that as time was very precious he would have taken any risk to avoid losing an hour. This was not necessary, for the others, who knew him, understood it.

It was not long before the sea piled up. It had been already running unpleasantly high, but now the black walls grew hollow towards their summits and the area of breaking crest increased, though the froth that spouted from it was hurled away down-wind like smoke. The steamer was deluged fore and aft each time a comber picked her up and she twisted horribly, poised aloft with her fore-half in free air, while Markham wrenched upon the long iron tiller, knowing that if she swerved off her course the next would break solidly across her.

So she drove onwards into thick, spray-filled darkness, in a mad succession of skyward leaps, the pace growing intense as the crests raced on beneath her, and wild plunges head-foremost down into the hollows, which filled Dane with a distressful sensation. He felt that he had left the interior portions of his anatomy behind him. The wind dropped as suddenly as it came, but they were in shallow soundings, and the sea raged the same, save that the spray tossed and fell and was no more driven against the battered crew in wind-packed sheets. There was red flame at the crusted funnel, and blinding steam of brine evaporated on hot iron in the narrow hole where Crawshay tended the engines almost parboiled, but still, pounded and sluicing, the tiny vessel clung to the surface, and reeled on before the seas.

Dawn came. Murky cloud clogged the rim of the ocean, and a streak of pale sulphur-yellow broadened above the dusky strip which, seen only when the craft rushed aloft, marked the jungles and watery forest along the low-lying shore. Swiftly the light grew brighter and the dusky strip resolved itself into many detached patches

of verdure rising like islands out of the depths of the sea. A waste of foam and spray tossed between the launch and them, and Markham, who stared across it, said, "That ought to be the entrance. Take the helm and run her through. You were a friend of the first man who used the waterway, and should know the course in better than I do."

The other man grasped the tiller, and Dane was comforted by the helmsman's attitude. He showed no trace of hesitation, but swung the steamer's bows towards one of the islets as though he used it for a beacon and was sure of his course. Dane had studied a chart of that coast in the mate's room on the voyage out, and felt that this was just as well. There were very many clumps of forest, with deadly shoals between most of them, while the flood tide was evidently racing inland, and the roar of crumbling breakers came out of the hurled-up spray. Any mistake would certainly be followed by fatal consequences. The island rose higher and higher, became part of the forest behind it, a huge, red-painted iron buoy whirled by, and then for ten mad minutes every one held on by what came handiest as, half-buried most of the time, the steamer drove rather through than over the seething on the bar.

Next her occupants, black and white alike, gasped with relief as they shook the water from them, for a waste of mangroves stretched inland ahead, and the little craft, settling herself on an even keel, slid forward smoothly into a broad sheet of untroubled yellow water. They had entered one of the minor Nigerian arteries off which branched Sewin's Creek. "I ought to know the way," said the helmsman in reply to Markham's brief congratulations. "I lost my agency for bringing one of the Dutchmen in to land a good many hundred cases of gin without acquainting the authorities. Going straight has apparently paid you, Markham. It was go how I could, or starve, with me."

"How well it has paid me is a matter of considerable uncertainty just now," said Markham drily. "But the first thing we have to do is to find Sewin's Creek. My son's rough chart seems tolerably clear, and two tall palms are what we want first."

"There they are," said the helmsman; and Markham turned to Dane.

"You have had your first taste of romantic Africa, Charlie, and I hope you are duly impressed with it. But in all seriousness I owe you and Eveline a heavy debt. If this had not been a handy and powerful vessel there would have been an end of us some hours ago, and, too probably, of the men we came to help."

"The gift was worthy of the giver, sir," said Dane, who leaned against the coaming with the brine dripping from him.

## XXVI

### THE RELIEF OF MAHOGANY CAMP

THE longed-for day was breaking, and the giant trees growing into definite shape showed blackly through a haze of smoke, when two of its garrison watched beside an angle of the breastwork of Mahogany Camp. The roar of a flintlock volley still vibrated across the bush in the rear of the stockade, and Markham strained his ears to catch the answer, for his eyes were fixed upon the river. They ached and the lids were reddened by the biting powder-smoke. The remnants of his garments hung all clammy with dew very loosely about his angular frame, but the repeating rifle-barrel was hot in his bony fingers. He had opened the breech to cool it, and thin vapour curled from the muzzle.

Lyle leaned with both elbows on a log close beside, his hard hands, grained by powder, clenching a weapon that was hotter than Markham's, while Johnston of Warrimba squatted, a most unclerical figure, under shelter of the timber, slipping cartridges into the cylinder of an American rifle. He had discarded his jacket, and rolled one sleeve clear of the smeared and blackened arm to the elbow. With occasional dashes to assist Cummings when invisible men who howled and fired at random broke cover and sought it again as the Krooboys' flintlocks flashed, the trio had kept

watch at that corner since darkness fell. Now their throats clove together and their mouths seemed filled with ashes, while two of them at least were sullenly murderous. They had endured eleven hours' tension, and had twice been warned what to expect when the camp was taken.

An expedition was on the way inland at last, and knowing he had sinned past forgiveness Okambo had evidently ordered their destruction at any cost. It was Lyle who first broke the silence.

"We are still alive, and it will be broad daylight in a few minutes," he said. "I hardly expected to see another sunrise, and we probably wouldn't have, only for Cummings. The man was fighting mad when he went over the stockade as the last lot came up. What can they be holding off for? The sun will soon be lifting, and we'll get a reprieve if they're not contriving some fresh devilry."

Markham nodded. "They know something of the game," he said. "Feint along the rear of the stockade—Cummings must stave off that—to cover frontal attack. They'll be dropping down stream now, and we should hear the paddles every minute. I'd give—what wouldn't either of us give for light enough to see them clearly by?"

Lyle laid down his rifle, fished a slip of stone out of his pocket, and passed it methodically along the edge of a long-hafted axe. There was no time to adjourn to the grindstone, and, save for two notches, it was already rubbed down to a razor-edge. He felt it with his thumb, stood up and twice whirled the heavy wedge of steel whistling round his head; then, while the man from Warrimba shuddered, said with a dry cackle in his parched throat—

"It's quite unorthodox, but I'd prefer it to the rifle if they run in fast enough, and they can get me if they can so long as I have two minutes' clear play and room to swing this in. There was a true story about a lumber man and a wolf-pack on the Saskatchewan. Clove seven of them into halves and quarters before they pulled him down. I remember how one of his partners, who came up five minutes too late, told us what he saw one summer day under the glaciers of Coolyquot, which I shall probably never see again. It was heavenly cool up there. This place is like the pit!"

Johnston said nothing. His principles did not prevent him reloading the rifles in a struggle for bare life, and he wiped out a barrel with oily tow. Without his assistance the result might have been different, and however much he regretted the necessity for it he had done his part. Markham remembered the fact, and, glancing towards him, said, "We are both of us sorry for leading you into this."

"I don't blame you; I came of my own will," Johnston answered, with a sigh. "One could have wished it otherwise; but at least it will not be at the hands of our own people, as some of us have died. And how should they know what they are doing?"

Day comes swiftly in the tropics, but it was not clear daylight yet, and the steam of the river thickened the foul haze which hung about the camp, hung as though it would never lift, until it was with relief Markham said, "Stand by. They're coming!"

A roar went up from the direction of the rear stockade, and if the voice was the voice of Cummings the cry was inarticulate, like that of a beast of prey turning upon the hounds. The thud-thud of paddles came out of the mist, the undergrowth rustled, while the Krooboys snarled, and Lyle, who blinked at the water without turning his head, patted his rifle affectionately and licked his cracked lips. His immediate attention was centred upon the river front.

A dozen flintlocks flashed, not together, but nearly so, and Markham, glancing over his shoulder, could see the smoke curl about the rear stockade. There were howls in the forest behind it, a burst of almost cheerful if illegitimate language from the white man who held that side, and then silence, through which the ringing of ramrods jarred. The beat of paddles drew nearer. They were close at hand now.

"They're afraid of him," said Markham. "It's comprehensible. Ah! the first canoe. A better mark than we're used to. There's for one of you!"

His rifle-barrel jumped upon the breastwork, and the paddles lost their rhythmic swing in the leading canoe. An ejector clicked, and Lyle, who drew back his hand as a spent shell shot clear, growled, "Got two of them. Stop the fellow who is steering her while I rake the next one."

Two shapes with white surge beneath them and black limbs swaying above were partly visible. More swept dimly into the scope of vision, and a handful of black men with flintlocks came running towards that portion of the breastwork. Then, as the long gas-pipe guns flamed, Markham saw nothing but a wisp of bluish vapour. The air was saturated and almost still, and he ground his teeth as he waited for the foe to make a landing under the filmy cover. But at least they would have light, for a shaft of golden radiance broke through the haze, and turned the limp folds of the lost launch's ensign which hung above the stockade into a patch of glowing crimson. A passing puff of air shook half the dew-soaked bunting clear of the staff, and as it flapped for a moment the quartered crosses gleamed in one corner. "It might be an omen," said Markham. "Hallo! what are they waiting for?"

The canoes had certainly stopped, for a breadth of river which commenced to shimmer grew empty, while the uncertain splash of paddles that ceased and recommenced suggested a retrograde movement into the rapidly thinning haze.

"They're drawing off," Lyle said, with a gasp. "Ah, there's a horn in the forest. Hallo, Cummings; any movement in the rear?"

"Niggers slipping back through the bush so far as I can make out," was the answer.

Markham mopped his forehead, Lyle squared his shoulders as he drew in a great breath, and Johnston leaned upon the logs, quivering visibly. The end had appeared almost certain a few minutes earlier, and now each of the trio felt bewildered and shaken by the unexpected rather than thankful for a respite. So several long minutes passed, while as the stretch of sunlit water broadened it became evident there was no craft afloat on the river between them and a bend.

"Vanished, melted, vamoosed!" said Lyle. "Is it panic, or some fresh cunning? Stand by with every gun, Cummings. Good Lord! No—it can't be. Yes. Clarence, are you deaf?"

Markham had not depended upon his powers of observa-

tion for many a meal, as his comrade had done in the Western forests. Neither had he learned to trace each move of the quarry by the flutter of a leaf, and he could hear nothing, but the sight of the Colonial's face, which was stamped with intense eagerness, filled him with a vague hope, and his voice was hoarse as he asked, "What is it?"

"I thought," and Lyle let the words fall slowly as he leaned forward in an attitude of strained attention, "I thought it was—engines—now I am sure of it. A steamer's engines."

There followed a few moments' profound silence until a Krooboy howled, "Fine; oh, fine too much! 'Teamboat lib, sah."

"Sure!" said Lyle. "Coming down river, too. The Government men would have come up, and not the Sewin's Creek way. But it's a steamer, a fast one, and she's tackling the canoes. Those are magazine rifles talking."

A quick, strident ringing rolled across the forest. It was answered by a duller thudding and an indefinite uproar, while a moving column of smoke appeared above the palm tufts beyond the mahoganies, and to set all doubts at rest a whistle shrieked out a delirious message of relief. Thereupon Johnston threatened to choke, and while Lyle thumped him on the back, saying, "Hold up; you'll finish yourself with that cough of yours some day, sir," Cummings swore at the forest and all its inhabitants with sheer light-hearted fluency.

Johnston recovered, and the two others nodded towards each other, saying nothing. They could hardly have made their feelings clear even if they had felt inclined to try, for the black men set up a deafening clamour. Help of some kind was clearly at hand, but one question still remained unanswered—why was it coming down river? They were soon to learn. With a cloud of smoke at her funnel, and the foam piled high at her bows seething aft to unite in a white upheaval beneath her stern, a steamer raced out from beneath the matted foliage, and Markham passed his hand across his eyes with a gesture of bewilderment.

"She's flying the red ensign instead of the white or union," he said. "Must be civilians on board her—who on earth can they be? They're saluting us—seem perfectly crazy."

Cummings reached the foot of the flagstaff with a bound, and thrice the crimson folds of bunting fell and ascended, while the steamer's flag made answer and her whistle shrieked. Lyle snatched up the glasses.

"They might know us. Four white men shouting themselves hoarse, and none of them is Heron," he said. "One, apparently an ancient party, pretty well purple in face and waving his helmet as if he wanted to wrench his arm off. Oh—great Columbus!"

Lyle snapped to the glasses, and gripped Markham's arm as he added, "Stand by for a surprise, Clarence—it's your father."

There was no need for Clarence to borrow the glasses now. The steamer, which had been built to race all rivals for the first chance of chaffering with the engineer of an incoming vessel short of fuel and haul out the heavy coal barges against the rush of the Trades, was shortening the distance between them at headlong speed, hidden almost from sight at times by the smoke of her clanging engines, while the blood bounded within the watcher, for the man who leaned over the rail with eyes fixed upon him was certainly Northop Markham. The canoes had vanished, but still spurts of flame flickered among the leaves, and at intervals blue wisps blew out above the steamer's rail. The firing ceased as she closed with the camp, and when the speed diminished Clarence, who balanced himself high on a slippery log, pointed to deeper water under the breastwork, shouting, "Run her in hard on to soft mud here."

It was done, and Lyle held Cummings back by main force when Clarence dropped from the log. "I dare say the old man can hold out a little longer without seeing you," he said.

Northop Markham was the first ashore, but he halted when a few paces from his son, and his voice shook a little as he asked, "All well?"

"All well, sir," answered Clarence. "Only lost two

or three Kroos. How are they at home?" and Markham raised his sun helmet as he said, "Thank goodness! They couldn't be better. Well done, my boy, well done!"

Nothing more was said. Each took the other's sentiments for granted, and perhaps, after the fashion of his race, would have considered an exhibition of them indecent. So they turned towards the breastwork after a hand-grip with a satisfied smile, and Lyle, who reached down from the summit, said cheerfully, "Let me welcome you to Mahogany Camp. We are all uncommonly glad to see you, sir."

Cummings was not, however, to be ignored, and when the visitor's shoulder appeared above the logs he made a grasp at it and jerked Markham, who was no feather-weight, not only on to, but almost head-foremost over them. The result of this was that its lawful owner, alighting heavily, staggered wildly into the clearing before he could recover his balance, and then stood fast, gasping, with a great rent in the back of his jacket.

"There is no doubt about the heartiness of your reception. But you needn't have torn the clothes off me," he said.

Then from revulsion of feeling everybody laughed inordinately, and when they grew serious again Markham glanced round at the ragged, sun-blistered scarecrows, litter of empty cartridge shells and fouled weapons, with comprehending eyes.

"It has been a hot corner. Reminds me of——but that is beside the question. Where is the bag?" he said.

"In the bush and the river," answered Clarence. "It was thick black darkness when they ventured close. They were clearly bent on annihilating us, and would have succeeded but for your arrival."

The launch, run hard aground, was securely garrisoned, cases of provisions were hurried ashore from her, and soon the united party sat down to what was to some of them a royal feast, under an awning stretched across an angle of the breastwork. Clarence told his story, or most of it, and the merchant turned towards the missionary.

"I must thank you and your colleagues for what you did for my son," he said, with old-fashioned courtesy,

then, lapsing into dry humour, continued, "I hope we shall be friends. It is only fair to give even the devil —or, according to some of your friends, his prototype an African trader—his due, and you have seen few signs of alcoholic debauchery in this camp—have you?"

Johnston smiled feebly. "One is apt to grow uncharitable by contemplating one side of the question only. Your son and his companions have enlightened me. He pledged himself to sell no gin up here—and I should be glad to be numbered among your friends."

Markham related the incidents of his journey, and when he concluded Clarence said, "Our own launch was a fast one, but you beat my record run. She is a wonderful craft, sir!"

Dane's eyes glistened with pleasure, but Markham cast him a glance of warning as he answered, "She is, and she remains a charge on the venture, for I have not yet paid for her, and only obtained her through the kind offices of a generous friend. Now I want your attention, because you have all an interest in this scheme. I have been playing two games at once, of which this is the smaller, and, under the powers our agreement gave me, have hypothecated the concession. That is, placed it in pawn for much less than its value. You follow me?"

Lyle looked startled, but his face relaxed, and he nodded as Cummings broke in, "We are quite prepared to back up our senior partner."

"I am honoured by your confidence," continued Markham, "but your interests are safe. Let me explain. I hold stocks of oil, and extensive agreements with native gatherers for which they have received value in advance, but because latterly oil could hardly be sold at two-thirds its cost I determined not to realise at a ruinous figure. When I pledged the concession I transferred oil to you; the market was practically stagnant then, and it meant that I borrowed from you, on security, at better terms than I could from outsiders. There is a demand for the commodity now. Do you still understand me?"

"I think so," said Lyle. "If we wish we can sell the oil and redeem the concession at any time."

"Exactly," said Markham. "But further, no article

of commerce can long remain much below its cost of production, and I stand to win heavily when prices rise. On opportunity, we can either cable to sell your portion or you can hold it until payment is actually due, and take your profit. To explain again, my rivals sold at any price to break me, and I watched them, making every sacrifice to hold on, noting that as stocks grew smaller little new stuff came in, while the coast agents made few agreements with native producers. I see signs of a big revival in demand shortly, though I hardly think my rivals do."

"We'll stand in with you," said Lyle, "taking your word without details. Do just what you think best for us."

"I fancy it will pay you," said Markham quietly.

"You're wise," interposed one of the men from Lagos. "It's a game I once saw played out in another commodity. Combination that's busted now went bear to smash Evans. Evans begged and borrowed, and, I dare say, stole, and, while they shoved down prices, involved himself apparently hopelessly, holding fast on to his goods. Meantime, the niggers gathered nothing, and when demand set in the other fellows were caught with no supplies and contracts to fill. Lord! how Evans plundered them. Oil is, of course, more widely diffused, but it was an interesting lesson."

"History has a way of repeating itself, and a wise man remembers the experience of others," said the merchant drily.

Mahogany Camp remained besieged, and great booms were lashed across the river. It was also fired into regularly, especially at night, without much damage to its garrison, who, with the exception of Johnston, had no desire to leave it, but as this was quite impossible he had to wait an opportunity of soliciting help for his comrade. They accordingly made themselves as comfortable as possible, and hoped for news of the Government expedition which Markham said was on the way, until one night there was a patter of firing in the forest, followed by the crash of a solid volley.

"Rifles!" said Clarence when the white men sprang to their posts. "Drilled troops, and not many of them.

There it is again. Only a handful. If the niggers concentrate fast enough they'll be done for. What was that shout?"

"Moslem soldiers going in with the bayonet," said Crawshay; and Markham added, "It's a Haussa yell. Suggests a Protectorate reconnoitring party hard pressed, though one wouldn't expect them here. You are military commander, Clarence; what do you recommend?"

"That I make a sortie," said Clarence. "Our boys will stand by Lyle. I'll take you, Cummings, and Dane, and a dozen picked men. With good luck we may bring them in."

"You'll be careful?" said Northop Markham. "I daren't say no. Go, and good luck go with you," and Clarence and the men he chose plunged into the forest as silently as they could, leaving wonder and anxiety behind them.

## XXVII

### THE ARREST OF CLARENCE MARKHAM

WHAT happened in the forest none of the watchers waiting eagerly behind the stockade knew. Their eyes told them nothing, and the exact meaning of the shouting, braying of horns, and roll of firing that reverberated among the avenues of stately trunks was as hidden as the movements of the men who sought each others' lives in the blackness of the night.

Northop Markham paced fiercely up and down, halting at intervals to try to pierce the gloom, while Cummings, who passed him, heard him say half-aloud, "It would be almost past bearing if I lost him now."

At last, while white men and negroes whispered in clusters, a crackle of undergrowth grew louder, and was succeeded by a patter of running feet that presently ceased, while flashes in quick succession rent the darkness, after which, recommencing, it changed into a rush of unseen figures towards the stockade.

"They're coming!" roared Lyle. "Stand by them

gun, you Cavally country boy. I'll hail them, Mr. Markham."

His voice rang out, and there was a yell from the negroes and a British shout when the answer came back, "Protectorate troops, and your rescue party!"

Two stakes slipped from their fastenings were lifted clear of the stockade, and when Lyle held up a blue portfire black men in sand-coloured uniform and the camp boys surged, all mixed together, through the opening. The intense brightness flickered upon their rifle-barrels and twinkled from bayonet to bayonet, but several pairs who carried their weapons slung bore limp human burdens between them. Last came the white men, one in uniform with a heavy revolver slung by a lanyard dangling about him.

He halted, calling out sharply, and the rifle-butts came down together with a thud; then turning towards Clarence said, "Must thank you for your timely assistance. Don't know in the least where I've got to, or who you are, but I see several white men, and explanations can follow. In the first place, as the niggers don't seem inclined for another taste of the bayonet, I want to stow my wounded safely. Two of them are pretty bad, poor devils."

"None of our men more than scratched," announced Clarence, to the great relief of Markham senior.

The officer was a young man, curt in speech, with just then a somewhat subdued manner, but he looked puzzled, and for some reason Johnston of Warrimba groaned as he drew back out of sight into the shadow. He was also thankful when Clarence said, "We have a canvas shelter in use as a hospital. Bring the lantern, Cummings. I'll show you where to put your wounded. Two of our party know a little surgery, and will be glad to do their best for them."

"Very good of you!" said the officer. "I'm ignorant of the art myself, but wouldn't like to lose them—very plucky beggars. Sergeant, tell them to bring along those doolies. As soon as you have looked to my damaged men I'll do myself the pleasure of making your acquaintance."

The black soldiers took up their burdens, and Cummings, carrying a lantern, led the way to the extemporised

hospital. The wounded were carefully laid down, and Clarence, turning, saw that the black sergeant, who stood, a stiff, upright figure, in the entrance, had fixed his eyes on him. Then there was sudden darkness as Cummings dropped the lantern.

"The confounded thing burned my finger. A Krooboy kicked the handle off it, and you can only get hold by the top," he explained; while Lyle's voice broke in, "We'll light it again in a minute as soon as I've sent for matches, and see what can be done. Your men will be sure of good attention at my comrade's hands, and in the meantime we can offer you refreshment and will quarter your black sergeant with some of our Mahomedans. You will go with him, Clarence."

"Thanks!" said the officer dubiously. "I'm anxious about them, but really couldn't do any good or I wouldn't leave them;" and Clarence felt a sharp jerk at his sleeve, while a voice said in his ear, "Keep out of that black sergeant's sight. He's the man we met at the outpost, and I caught him looking at you."

Everybody heard Cummings groping for the extinguished lantern as well as swearing because he could not find it, but it was too dark to see that he held it carefully in one hand, while Lyle breathed easier when Markham led the officer and his sable follower away. Johnston had related what Seymour told them at Warrimba, and the Colonial had his suspicions. "You're a bit of a genius, Cummings," he commented. "I very much fear there's going to be trouble, but it's never judicious to meet it half-way. So we'll just wait for the crisis, and then act as appears necessary."

The sergeant left the others to find quarters for his men under a Krooboy's guidance, and Clarence escorted the officer into the Europeans' tent, where in his usual abrupt fashion he introduced himself.

"Lieutenant Lawrence Seymour, of the Protectorate Service. They sent me up with Jardine and native guides ahead of the expedition to prospect for a round-about back way of getting at Okambo. Jardine left me to investigate one route, and I pushed on. Friendly niggers bolted, the other kind closed in, and if we hadn't picked

up two of Shotille's spies, who told us about you in a tight corner, I might have lost the whole detachment as well as myself. I'm duly grateful, but would like to know who I'm indebted to."

"I am Clarence Markham, engaged in peacefully cutting timber here until Okambo's war boys besieged me," said the man who bore that name, hurriedly. "This is my father, owner of what we hope is a valuable concession from King Shotille—Mr. Cummings. The others were our assistants; Lyle, the big man, a partner."

"Glad to meet you all!" said Seymour, who looked curiously at the engineer. "Mr. Cummings, you remind me very much of a man described at some length to me whom I would like to see. He was, I understand, a mechanical genius. Did you ever by any chance meet the Reverend Hilary Legh at Warrimba, somewhere down river?"

Northop Markham glanced at the speaker with surprise. It was possible the others had not made certain portions of their experiences so clear as they might have done. Clarence hoped his face was as expressionless as he endeavoured to make it, but Cummings answered cheerfully—

"It's quite possible. There are other good-looking folks in Western Africa, and I don't claim a monopoly of manly beauty. Once saw a rascal who might have been my brother on the Silver River. As to being a genius of any kind, that's certainly not me. I've heard of a place called Warrimba, but I never was there."

Seymour appeared relieved, even glad to accept the answer, but Clarence fell a prey to a growing anxiety, and devoutly hoped their guest would soon take his departure, though this hardly promised to be practicable. Still, remembering their various escapes, he cherished a faint hope that they might yet find a way out of what threatened to become an awkward position. Meantime, there was no hostile demonstration in the bush. Indeed, the garrison were now well able to repel any attack, and a meal was spread under the awning which served as mess tent. Seymour accepted the timber cutters' hospitality with evident appreciation. Cummings was

unusually brilliant in his own eccentric fashion, and one of the Lagos men almost rivalled him, while Northop Markham played the host with a genial dignity which made its due impression upon Seymour, who flung off the official stiffness he had at first assumed. He could see that several of the party were of finer stamp than other traders he had met, and he ended by treating Northop Markham with instinctive deference.

It was, so he said, an oasis. Under the roof of canvas there was good fellowship, light, food, and wine, and without foulness, heat, and the blackness of a forest filled with what he described as bloodthirsty naked devils. "It's a blessing I found you. Haven't spent such a pleasant evening since I came to Africa, and it's the more soothing because I half expected to find this camp occupied by a rascally smuggler who has certainly been selling both Shotille and Okambo arms," he concluded.

This state of harmony was, however, too pleasant to last, for presently the voice of one of the Lagos men rose up outside, "Aren't you coming in with me, Mr. Johnston? Our doctor is shy. Wants to come in and tell you he expects to cure his patients, but the bottles frightened him."

"He must be different from our own man," said Seymour drily.

A slight scuffle, which might have been made by somebody resisting a playful shove, followed, but the impatient protest, "I am too busy," was plain, while Clarence felt savage as he heard Lyle say softly, "Go in yourself and quit worrying Mr. Johnston, you idiot."

Instead of obeying, the first speaker laughed, the loose canvas was driven aside, and Johnston staggered into the tent with another man behind him, while Lyle stood revealed scowling darkly upon both of them before he withdrew. It was too late to save the situation, for Seymour rose, and the practical joker from Lagos said, "His reverence is bashful, and tripped over a tricing-line. I caught him passing the tent, and, knowing he was hungry, just brought him in."

"For which I will surely shake the life half out of you," said Cummings, *sotto voce*.

"Unexpected pleasure," said Seymour. "Know Mr. Johnston, but never thought I should find him here. Glad the niggers didn't hurt you after all, sir. I hope I didn't offend you last time we met, because you don't seem glad to see me. Have you seen any more of the arms smuggler?"

Johnston was not glad. He was troubled with a conscience, and looked, as he was, distinctly unhappy. Though the revelation at Warrimba had been a shock he had, when the latter told him his whole story under pledge of secrecy, resumed his former friendship with Clarence Markham, and now hoped he might not be forced to betray him. He had even waited to consider how he could shield the latter before asking assistance for his comrade.

"It is so—so unexpected, but you certainly didn't offend us," he said, smiling feebly. "I'll take a little of the yam-chop, Mr. Markham."

Seymour could not well fail to see there was something wrong, but he repeated airily, "That is reassuring, but you have not answered my question about the smuggler, sir. Sorry I must repeat it. You"—and he turned to Markham—"will no doubt excuse me obtruding business, but this is an important subject."

"There is no arms smuggler. We were all of us mistaken," said Johnston in desperation, busying himself with his palm-oil-chop; and Seymour answered stiffly, "We were not all mistaken, sir. Captain Mulgrave, who is a man of experience, found clear traces of his doings, besides capturing good rifles from niggers who told him how they got them. Ah! again please accept my apologies, Mr. Markham—but what the devil is the matter with you, Mr. Cummings?"

Turning abruptly, he surprised the engineer in an expressive signal pantomime intended for the encouragement of the unfortunate missionary, and to express contempt for his persecutor.

"Nothing serious, thanks," said Cummings, with a grin. "I am sometimes afflicted that way. It will pass off immediately."

Johnston glanced at the trio with a hopeless air before

he resumed his meal, though he seemed to eat with difficulty, and Seymour became again the alert if not very judicious officer. He assumed his most consequential expression, saying, "As a loyal subject it is your duty to furnish all possible assistance in unravelling this mystery. A refusal could only reflect discreditably upon you, and I must respectfully demand an answer. To put it in another form, where is the man we spoke about at Warrimba?"

"This gentleman is a friend of ours. I also demand full consideration for him," said Northop Markham grimly.

Johnston hereupon deliberately laid down his spoon, saying, "As I have informed you already, I am not a detective, and must civilly refuse to answer."

The awkward silence that followed was very brief, for Clarence shook off Cummings' restraining grip and rose up, saying, "Further reticence would only bring trouble upon my clerical friend, and prove altogether useless. I am evidently the man you are looking for."

Seymour, who also rose, fumbled inside his tunic with an ashamed air. He was a young man and the task repugnant, but he could not shirk it. "I regret most sincerely that it should be you," he said. "Nevertheless, I must carry out my instructions, and here is my authority. It directs me to arrest you and hold you in safe custody until I can hand you over to Major Carwardine or send you to Calabar. There is no other course open to me, but I hope you will believe I'm sorry."

"You can't regret it more than I do," said Clarence drily.

"That's one thing you won't do," shouted Cummings. "Lyle, hallo, Lyle! Turn out your crowd and surround the tent. Hurry round the Lagos rascals, Crawshay, and seize the Protectorate fellows' arms!"

Seymour's hand dropped smartly to his holster, and he blew a silver whistle. There was a trampling outside, all rose from their places, and Lyle, who ripped aside part of the canvas revealing the black men running behind him, swore softly between his teeth. Clarence stood moodily still; Cummings, red in the face, glaring

at the officer, who held out a paper, touching his revolver with the fingers of his other hand; while Johnston's countenance formed a striking picture of confusion.

Northop Markham was the first to recover his composure, though it was but for a second he lost it, and he turned upon Cummings, saying, "Sit down, you fool."

Then he faced round towards Seymour, adding, "I am a loyal subject, and, if I were not, know that while we might, perhaps, successfully resist you now such a course could only end in disaster. If your warrant is clear we will not dispute it. Neither can I blame you for your action. There are, however, conditions. I do not intend to countenance my son's murder by any rash attempt to convey him away from here, in which the niggers would assuredly cut you off. Nor, as the concession means much to me, will I run the risk of losing it by lending you a man or the steamer. You will see a boom to-morrow which would prevent any craft escaping down river. You came here without our invitation, and I am afraid here you must stay until there is a better prospect of getting away. Further, if the camp is attacked my son must retain full command of the black men he has trained to obey him."

"May I add that I give you my parole?—and you need not fear I will run away," said Clarence Markham. "I, however, protest against the charges brought against me, having neither traded in arms nor broken any law of the Protectorate."

Seymour nodded. "I dare say there is a mistake somewhere, and hope there is. I accept your word," he answered. "Don't tell me more than you want to, for I shall have to give evidence. Mr. Markham's conditions appear reasonable. We had too much trouble to get in to risk every man getting out again. Meanwhile, I feel ashamed to abuse your hospitality, and can only hope you will be able to refute the charges."

Here the speaker paused, and, perhaps glad of somebody to vent his disgust upon, said sternly to Cummings, "You are the only member of the party whose conduct any man could complain of. You nearly succeeded in fooling me. Confound you!"

"I did my best," said Cummings, grinning. "It was easy, and you needn't apologise to me. I never bear malice, and under the circumstances will try to forgive you."

Seymour's face relaxed. "I wish I had you in my half-company for a week," he said. "Well, it's a painful position, but we can only put up with it."

So the affair was settled, and that night Clarence Markham lay for a time awake wondering what new catastrophe could befall him. He had lost both Florence and his liberty, while it might well happen that if the charge was proved against him by some ingenious conspiracy the loss of the concession would follow his conviction. He could see no hope anywhere, and for that very reason, because suspense is more trying than certain disaster, sank into merciful oblivion. He was visited by the man who had arrested him next morning, and felt grateful when Seymour said, "No doubt you will clear yourself, and in the meantime there's no reason why we should be enemies. I understand you held Her Majesty's commission, and I should be glad to inspect the defences with you."

During the days that followed, Seymour carefully ignored their relative positions and Johnston's appeals, which was as well, for twice the camp was assaulted under cover of night, and a sortie party hurled back again. Heavy booms were lashed across the river, and the question of munitions and provisions grew serious. The bushmen still lurked in force in the forest, and while his comrades' impatience increased Clarence sickened from no ostensible cause, and lost his grip and interest.

"I don't know what's the matter with me," he said in a moment of confidence to Lyle. "Probably I've been too long in this infernal climate, or the everlasting strain has been too much for me. I dare say I could shake the limpness off with a few weeks at sea, but instead I shall have time for convalescence in Calabar gaol, most likely."

At last one morning there was no more smear of smoke trail, and the bush was curiously still, while cunning scouts sent out to search it returned with the news that

the foe had departed silently during the night, leaving portable property behind them. The lost launch also lay partly dry on a sand bar beyond the bend. Seymour grew exultant at the news.

"Okambo must be in difficulties, and wants all his men," he said. "I shall leave at once if you will lend me the smaller vessel, Mr. Markham. I think I can promise that if she is damaged the Administration will recoup you. I am sorry we must part as we do—owe many thanks to you."

"I don't blame you," said Markham. "No doubt, so far as you conscientiously can, you will testify in our favour. Don't say any more about it. You can have the launch with pleasure. I am coming with you."

Markham senior was a judicious as well as a just man, and knew it might be well to secure a friend at court beforehand. The launch, which had been looted but not seriously damaged, was soon refloated, and that afternoon Seymour took his leave. He left the sergeant and a few files in the camp, which he said might serve as a valuable outpost. Lyle said little on parting with Clarence, but that little was straight to the point, and it was Cummings who, as the propeller commenced to throb, hurled the last farewell after him.

"We'll see you back inside three weeks, and mind you strike those red-taped idiots for a big indemnity," he shouted. "If not we'll come down for you, the whole free company, and sack Calabar if it's necessary. You savvy them palaver, you thick-headed heathen! Lib for go down and chop dam-fool Government fellow, t'ief all them thing in the Consulate, and take Cappy Clarry from him."

There was a roar from lusty black throats, a brandishing of long guns, and Clarence looked back on a mass of uplifted ebony arms, while so far had the negroes' exuberance carried them that Seymour shouted—

"Look to your rascals, Cummings. By George, two of them are getting ready to fire into us. I'll come back and burn the whole place and take you down to answer for your fooling if they do," and the engineer bounded into the shadow of a bush under which two half-naked

Africans were balancing their long-barrelled weapons. Then the white and black figures grew smaller and more indistinct, and when they vanished Clarence sat down dejectedly on the saloon skylight. His head ached, his brain seemed numb, and a physical limpness intensified his mental depression, none of which are unusual symptoms in that country.

"It seems cruel at the moment," said Johnston of Warrimba, who had seized the first opportunity of descending the river to stir up the authorities to effect his colleague's rescue. "Still, these things are all for the best, you know. I also feel the keenest regret, but though I would have done anything to help you I could see no way."

"It was not your fault," said Clarence. "But I have received such consolations before, and hope you will excuse me saying, generally found it hard to credit them."

## XXVIII

### FLORENCE'S RENUNCIATION

THE merciful sea breeze rippled the muddy waters and set the palm tufts rustling overhead when, shortly after her husband's return, Mrs. Johnston talked with Florence Ellory outside the mission station at Silver River. Florence looked worn and fragile, and sat with folded hands abstractedly watching the yellow sluice of ebb tide hurry towards the sea, until at last her companion's words recalled her wandering fancy.

"After all it has cost us, Warrimba may never be reopened," the elder lady said, in a tone that betrayed some bitterness, as well as sincere regret. "The subject has been discussed, and my views have not received the consideration they are entitled to. Even if on his return from the expedition my husband were sent back I cannot, because the truth is best, conceal the fact that I no longer consider Warrimba a suitable field for you.

If we ever gathered the flock again they would remember Luala. Your name has been under consideration, and I may say there will shortly be an opening at Kangana, though, if you desired it, you might be transferred to a healthier locality on the coast. Kangana is not a desirable station from a hygienic point of view."

This was a mild description, for the Government officers described Kangana as a death-trap, and the traders more plainly still as the bottomless pit with the lid removed, but though Florence was aware of the conditions of life there the knowledge did not daunt her. Since the fatal interview with Markham, she had returned to her belief in the virtues of an iron self-discipline, and still smarted under the recollection of the fact that she had been a failure at Warrimba. She was suffering wholesome punishment for a weak yielding to the flesh, she thought, and might make expiation at Kangana the deadly. And yet while the brief intoxication lasted she had strangely alluring visions of a life in which labour would never become weariness, and, instead of cold repression, there might be growth and expansion in the warmth of love. But those visions had faded, and she answered Mrs. Johnston quietly, "I will go to Kangana if they will take me."

"In this case I can hardly advise you, but perhaps you are right," said the lady, with unusual gentleness. "They need help at Kangana, and the worse the station is the more there is to do. Ours is no task for idlers, and happiness may only be found in devotion to it soul and body. You can speak to the head of the district. He is interested in you. And now to turn to other subjects. I think you know the man who deceived us has been brought down a prisoner. He is to be tried shortly, and I understand there is convincing testimony against him."

It was curious that while the information further strengthened Florence's determination the satisfaction her companion betrayed should arouse her resentment, but it certainly did, and presently she sought the grey-haired teacher who directed mission operations in that region. He was a wise man, rendered gentle and very

patient by disappointments which had turned others hard and cold, and after listening carefully he said—

"Do you know that of those we send up to Kangana very few return? It is not a place for the young, for whom life may still hold in store other duties and legitimate joys. Think well. No ill-considered motive should induce you to choose Kangana. I am reluctant to send you there."

The speaker's tone was grave, as though he delivered a solemn warning, and Florence failed to meet his inquiring gaze, as she answered, "I desire to devote the rest of my life to teaching, and healing the sick. Except for a brief space, regretted now, I have always done so. Whether it is a long or short one, I would ask nothing better."

"Then," said the man quietly, "if that is your one reason, and you are in the same mind by the first of the next month, I dare not say no. But consider well and earnestly, and make sure of what you do. The surgeon must also certify your fitness."

Florence did not doubt her own mind, and considered the question already settled, while that afternoon she landed before the Consulate with fruit and green-lime water for the black soldiers sent back from the expedition who lay in the hospital. She carried one small basket in her hand, and approached the pile-raised residency to acquaint the officer in charge of it with her intentions, while her canoe boys bore the rest direct to the hospital. When she turned an angle of the building she stood suddenly fast. In spite of what had passed when they last met and her renunciation a few hours earlier, her heart throbbed painfully and she suffered from a momentary sense of suffocation. Clarence Markham lay almost at full length upon a wooden bench in the shade of the overhanging verandah, with a dogged, hopeless look on his very hollow face. Black dejection and bodily weakness showed themselves in his very pose. A Yoruba sentry with bayonet fixed paced up and down not far away, and two dusky soldiers stood in the shadow as though watching him.

Markham was the first to speak, and he rose with an effort, saying hoarsely, "Florence!"

His listless movements told their own tale. He was sick and a prisoner, and instead of anger the girl felt a sudden outflow of compassion towards him. Then, though she knew the warm blood surged upwards from her neck and her face was hot, she answered with an attempt at composure, "I did not expect to find you. They said you were at the barracks. And I am sorry to see you—to see you so."

"A prisoner," broke in Markham. "One who dare not move without the permission of yonder black soldiers, and is only spared the last indignity of irons. You are amply revenged, Florence."

There was a flash of anger in the girl's eyes, then they filled, and she said gently, "That speech was not worthy of you. It was needlessly cruel. I was not myself when I said what I was afterwards ashamed of. Now, in all sincerity, I am sorry."

The ebony soldier, who could only understand the fantastic English used along the coast, stalked past solemnly, but Markham waited until he reached the other corner of the building before he answered, "It was brutal—but you were right. It is a poor excuse to say that circumstances forced my hand for me. Still, it is good to know you no longer hate me. I wonder if ever again you could believe in me."

The man's voice and appealing gaze conveyed, for so far he held himself in hand, more than he meant, but Florence answered the question with quiet resolution in the way that seemed best to her—

"It is not for me to judge your motives, and I am glad I have seen you, because it is hardly possible I shall ever do so again. I owe you a debt of gratitude, and I forgot it that night at Warrimba. You must believe I recognise it now. I am going inland to Kangana shortly."

"Kangana," broke out Markham. "My God! They shall not send you to that deadly hole;" and Florence met his eyes as she said, "Hush! I have made my choice, and my life is my own. It is definitely decided. I have pledged it wholly to the service of the missions."

Markham clenched his hands and groaned. Then he spread them out with a helpless gesture, answering

incoherently, "A precious mess I have made of everything. It was bad before, and now, judging from the mass of lying evidence raked up against me, I shall be a convicted felon before a few weeks are over, while you—you go to—Kangana. Florence, will you at least believe on my solemn word that, though they may well prove me guilty, I have neither smuggled arms nor liquor? Is it quite too late? Must you go? I—confusion—I can do nothing, and I would give my life gladly to hold you back from Kangana."

"Yes!" said the girl, choking down something that gathered in her throat. "I will try to believe you innocent if you say you are, but I am going to Kangana, and for the last time must say good-bye. You will take this fruit as a token that we part in amity?"

Markham stretched out his hand—not for the basket—he clutched at a last faint hope, and almost against the dictates of reason would have detained her. There was one chance in a hundred he might escape and the verdict be given before Florence left for Kangana. But a tramp of feet and jingle of steel commenced behind the building. An English voice said, "Tell the sergeant to take his prisoner in," and Florence, slipping past him, disappeared round the opposite angle, while Markham turned savagely, the basket of fruit in his hand, towards the European who approached him.

"It's earlier than usual. Are you afraid of me making a break for the bush?" he asked.

"Not exactly!" answered the other with an ironical smile. "You would be shot before you reached it, but we shall be thankful when Carwardine sends for you. We have tried to smooth things down for you, and you might at least be civil, if you have no gratitude."

Markham was removed to his quarters, and one morning while he waited trial his future judge, Major Carwardine, an elderly, sober-faced soldier whose blunt speech concealed mental abilities of no mean order and a very kindly nature, sat reading a letter brought in by a bushman, before his tent, pitched in a glade of the dark forest surrounding Okambo's swamps. Wiry men of dusky colour, and mostly of Moslem faith, in ochre-tinted

uniform, squatted in groups about their cooking fires. Rifles stood piled in clusters close beside, while a swarm of carriers laughed, chattered, and squabbled among the huge heaps of stores in the rear of the camp. Seen through openings between the rows of mighty trunks, other armed men paced up and down dim avenues in case any of Okambo's warriors should attempt a surprise. Two more companies of coloured troops were painfully floundering through the swamps somewhere behind them, and when these came up Major Carwardine hoped, thanks to certain information recently received, to strike Okambo a crushing blow just where he would least expect it. How he eventually did so does not concern this story.

Lieutenant Lawrence Seymour and several other officers waited close by, and Major Carwardine read to them the letter he had carefully studied. It was a message from missionary Legh and ran, in very shaky characters, as follows—

"Second hut, east row, Lambana Village. Monday.

"I write this at the command of Okambo, trusting he has no renegades who can read English. He desires me to say that he will deliver me safely to you on conditions I need not repeat, since his heralds know them. I ask you to reject those conditions. There can be no cessation of bloodshed until Okambo's tyranny is crushed and his fetich advisers driven out. I have witnessed many instances of awful cruelty here, outrages on humanity past description, and I charge you to disregard Okambo's threats, and concede nothing on my account. No violence has been offered me, but I am sick—poisoned by some fetich priest, I think—and feel that life is ebbing from me. Therefore, as any sacrifice made for my sake would be made in vain, I solemnly bid you press on and end this reign of abominable cruelty, in God's name."

"It is a good letter," said Captain Mulgrave, who did not always, or indeed often, appreciate missionary zeal. "A very good letter, sir. That man abstains from the usual farrago about his principles, and seems perfectly

willing to let Okambo murder him sooner than stop us. I don't like to express my opinion too plainly. It would sound brutal—but every petty robber will rise against us if we hold our hand, while prompt action might save many lives, especially if you could trust that rascal Smithers to show us the swamp path to the back of the big stockade. Personally, I would sooner trust Judas Iscariot. The man who is willing to betray Okambo, as he doubtless betrayed Shotille, is equally capable of selling us in turn, unless the price you promised was a long one."

"It was," said the commander drily. "From a sentimental point of view I would sooner have had him flogged, but we can't afford to despise his information."

"I believe Smithers robbed Okambo of some fetich treasure," said another man. "What was there in those packages he sent South so carefully which the niggers seemed afraid of?" But Major Carwardine broke in—

"That is beside the point. The question is: would Okambo assassinate the missionary? I ask your opinion, gentlemen, as to whether, yielding to his demand, we should nullify every good result to secure Legh's safety, or march on the stockade as soon as we are ready."

There was no answer, and the commander said gravely, "I observe that none of you are anxious to share the responsibility."

The men looked at each other, each knowing that Legh had himself supplied the one answer, though nobody cared to say so, until there was a murmur of relief when Mulgrave broke in, "As it appears impossible to yield to Okambo, may I suggest an alternative, and remind you that Lambana is not stockaded? The sanctity of the Ju-Ju is supposed to protect it. With your permission, I would take a few picked Mahomedans and chance cutting him out in a night attack. This is a case in which, being white men, we must do something, and it wouldn't cripple the expedition if you lost the whole of us."

"You are right," said the commander. "I considered a similar scheme, but yours is better. Can't spare more than two officers. Patience, gentlemen; you can't all go!"

"May I offer?" said Seymour eagerly. "Circumstances point to me, for you were good enough to remind me, sir, that I blundered in leaving him at Warrimba. It would give me an opportunity of repairing my mistake!"

The commander looked at Mulgrave, who answered, "I'll take him, with your approval, sir!"

Details were promptly settled, but Mulgrave quenched his comrade's satisfaction by mentioning that he had been chosen simply because he could best be spared in case the niggers bagged both of them, which he added might very well happen. Then he turned impatiently upon Johnston, who had followed the force to urge some attempt at rescue, and now inquired when they would start.

"It's immaterial, since you can't come with us," he said, glancing down the revolver barrel he passed a wire brush through. "Why? Well, for one reason you can't crawl through swamp and thicket like a snake. Neither can we, unfortunately, but we are both of us pretty certain of any nigger we line the muzzle on. It is going to be a very grim business, and a non-combatant would be an insufferable handicap."

"Then let me go with you until you near the village, and I'll find my own way in. I only want to reach him," pleaded Johnston; and the Protectorate officer's manner changed abruptly as he said, "And waken the whole place up? It can't be done, sir. You must hope for the best, and refrain from placing obstacles in the way of your friend's release. I think we can promise to do our utmost."

It was noon when the handful of hinterland Moslem marched out of camp, and there was an approving look in the face of Major Carwardine as he returned the salute of Mulgrave, who led them. A larger force would have defeated its own object, for success depended upon secrecy and speed. Still, soldiers born, descendants of the men who had twice founded great and semi-civilised Sultanates in the Soudan, as these were, those who watched them swing, a line of ochre, ebony, crimson, and twinkling steel, into the forest, wondered if they had seen the last of them.

The story of their doings has, like that of other desperate ventures in the same region tersely recorded in a dozen lines of an official report, never been clearly told. When white Christian and dusky follower of the Prophet, bound by the same oath of service, outwit the African heathen at his own game, gruesome things happen, and the tale of the missing supplies sufficient details. But they returned triumphant, at midnight a few days later—some of them—with several bayonets bent and rifles fouled, and limped into camp with a hammock lurching between two of the files.

"The rest are missing, sir," said Mulgrave, who looked very weary as he saluted the commander. "But we got the sick man. His condition seems serious, and I consider it would be well for Davies to see him at once. We owe our success to Lieutenant Seymour's ingenuity."

"Well done!" said Major Carwardine briefly. "Tell Surgeon Davies, Gray," and when the line of tired men limped on, Johnston of Warrimba walked beside the hammock holding a torch. Its red light fell upon the wax-like face of his colleague, who lay senseless therein.

A week had passed, and one night Johnston sat in a deserted hut of the native village which served as supply depôt, watching beside Legh, who lay on a frame of canvas, gasping heavily.

"He'll go out before dawn, certain; I can do no more," said a surgeon left behind crippled by the hole a ragged piece of cast-iron had made in his leg, as he slipped away.

The chatter of tired black carriers came in with the smell of wood smoke through the doorway, but there was no sound in the room save the sick man's uneven breathing and the rustle of creeping things in the thatch. A kerosene lamp that diffused an evil savour burned smokily, flickering in the draught.

"You will do me a favour," said Legh at last. "There's a letter in yonder book I want you to seal and deliver to Miss Ellory on opportunity after my release. I hope it is legible. My hand had lost its cunning, but I felt there was certain counsel I must give her. It is the last letter I shall ever write. There is another service I want to ask, but raise me a little. It hurts me to speak."

"Whatever it is, I will do it," said Johnston, coughing

vigorously. "Hilary, we cannot spare you. There is so much we cannot do—without you. If Okambo's men had only taken me!"

Legh smiled very faintly. "I'm not equal to paying you a compliment to-night, old friend," he said. "And we have long accepted it as an axiom that the unseen Head of Warrimba makes no mistakes. I want you to be a friend to Miss Ellory. Your wife is a good woman, but she and Florence are widely different in nature, and she does not understand her. It is possible, for my sake, she might even blame her, and you will remember clearly that Miss Ellory is blameless. You will, in case of necessity, testify I said so?"

"I should be glad to befriend her for my own sake," said Johnston. "We are childless, Hilary, and that girl is as precious as a daughter to me."

"There are things it is hard to speak of," continued the missionary. "But this is a hard world to the friendless, and one must not shirk one's duty. You guessed what I hoped for—but I wish to make it clear that from the moment she understood it Miss Ellory discouraged me. Even now, it would trouble me to think that any one should ever suspect her—I don't like the phrase—of trifling with me. She was in all things innocent and praiseworthy. So I wrote her that which, while we might meet again, my lips dare not utter, and this is why, when the time is drawing near, my thoughts are concerning her welfare. I went out against my English friends' wishes, and I think they have forgotten me."

Legh ceased, and lay propped on the pillows, gasping, while, with a clamour of negro voices almost drowning the sharp orders, a fresh detachment of carriers marched out of the forest, and Johnston, who could think of nothing else to do, patted his wasted hand reassuringly.

Then he said, more feebly, "So my last duty is ended. I can do no more for Warrimba, though I loved it well, but you may see it rise again to useful greatness out of its ashes. If not, it must be better so. The rest lies between me and my Maker only, and I shall shortly be called to answer for it. But Florence you can help, and I charge you to do so."

Again Johnston promised, and before he closed his heavy eyes Legh whispered, "It will not be long. I should like my tried comrade to watch with me."

An hour had passed, and Johnston, who admitted that he loved comfort, sat cramped all over, holding his comrade's hand, when Seymour, fresh from hurling savage abuse at the carriers, came in. Ammunition was being hurried forward, and many things had gone wrong. A sudden sense of solemnity came upon him as he met the eyes of the dying man. "Are you any easier, sir?" he asked. "I have sent fast runners back to the steamers, and we'll have cool iced drinks for you to-morrow."

"Thanks!" said Legh, with a feeble smile. "I am afraid I shall not need them. You might get more out of your carriers if you picked up a few words of their own tongue, Seymour."

"I'm sorry you heard me," answered the young officer, fidgeting. "Believe me, I'd sooner have caressed the black—the thick-headed niggers, if I had thought you would. But there's desperate hurry, and one has to maintain his reputation somehow. I can't help remembering I wasn't over civil to you once, and you may have taken me the wrong way. So I would like to say there's no doubt you people live up to that maxim in your service—and what you did has made the credit of Warrimba sure. I want to make reparation, if I'm not lucid. But we'll have ice and stores to-morrow, and you must get better."

Legh looked at him with dimming eyes, and said something the officer did not catch until, bending his head, he heard very faintly, "Rather in all service—and in all things—to the glory of God."

Legh turned his face feebly away from the light, and Seymour, beckoning Johnston as he slipped towards the door, asked softly, "What did he mean about the ice? Is he so bad?"

"Yes," said Johnston huskily. "In all probability you heard the last words he will ever speak. May I ask what he said?"

"I'd rather not just now. He had a right to speak them—they wouldn't come well from me," said Seymour, escaping hurriedly.

Johnston was right, and Hilary Legh's last utterance was characteristic of his life, for the dawn had not broken when the former sought Seymour, saying, "He has gone."

"I'm sorry," said the officer. "Doesn't quite express it, but I am. He was a great man, and we'll do all we can to show respect to him. I'll send several files to watch him, and you'll be ready—it would be well—early to-morrow."

So, until the garish African sunrise flamed in the eastern sky, the worn-out preacher of Christianity whose work was done lay in state, a very frail, wasted figure, with two ebony soldiers who swore by the Prophet standing with ordered rifles rigid as statues keeping ward over him, while two more who feared the bush gods watched outside the door. It may be the sleeper would have found nothing incongruous in this. He had learned a wide toleration in Africa, and there stretched between them all the bond of faithful service.

For sufficient reasons, white men hurry their dead into the dust they spring from in Western Africa, and before the sun had cleared the bush Johnston of Warrimba stood reciting, rather than reading from a book he did not see, words he knew too well, beside an open trench. A squad of black soldiers were drawn up close by, and Seymour stood on their flank bareheaded to do the dead man honour. It was quickly finished, the rifles flashed, and Johnston, looking across the forest towards the growing brightness of the east, asked the same great question that he who rested now and many who had toiled at the same task had asked before. There was no answer save the silent one of Nature, a rolling back of deadly mists as clean daylight replaced the night, and beating between the mighty, buttressed trunks one broad, dazzling shaft before whose effulgence all evil things slunk back into the shadow of the devil-haunted bush. Yet the mourner hailed it as a sign.

"Sympathise with you, sir," said Seymour as he turned away. "Felt it uncommonly myself, and you knew him well. It's another count against Okambo, and when we get in across the big swamp there'll be a settlement."

Johnston did not rebuke him. Indeed, he looked at

the speaker gratefully, while before an hour had passed a clamour commenced in the forest and voices answered from the huts. Then, file by file, dusky men in uniform swung with glinting weapons crowned with red tarbouches out from dim shade into the fierce glare, while one of fairer colour waved his helmet excitedly at the head of them. He hurried forward as the leading sections wheeled in the sandy square.

"Great news. Okambo is down," he said. "We got in behind his first stockade—got home with the bayonet and turned their own guns on them—there was brimstone. The few who got away must have told their story well, for word came down that Okambo had bolted for the bush. Mulgrave has gone after him, and when Major Carwardine has blown up his den it will be right-about and hurry home again."

## XXIX

### AT THE BAR

It was early one hot morning when Captain Mulgrave entered Clarence Markham's quarters on board a Government hulk moored in a deep and somewhat limpid river. They had lately been occupied by a subaltern officer, for Clarence had received better treatment than usually falls to the lot of a prisoner.

"The court-room is almost ready, but you can have a few minutes' conversation with your friends on deck," Mulgrave announced. "It promises to be an interesting case, and as my respected chief is perhaps the most painstaking officer in Africa you may be sure of a fair hearing. Major Carwardine has unlimited authority just now, and while you might perhaps appeal to Calabar, his decision would doubtless be confirmed there. I suppose you know Shotille has made submission?"

The speaker glanced at Markham, but the latter answered abstractedly, "No, but I don't see how that can affect me."

"It may," said Mulgrave. "We can't countenance private adventurers taking forcible possessions of a friendly chieftain's territory, so we have sent up a detachment and brought your party down."

Clarence followed him to the open air. Dense forest hemmed in the river, but a sandy square had been hewn out of it on one hand, and a whitewashed barracks flung back dazzling brightness from its centre, while an iron-roofed European dwelling stood beside the bank. Markham senior, Cummings, and Heron surrounded Clarence, and the merchant said, "It will be an anxious day, but we must hope for the best. The Amalgamation's man who appears as principal witness has already laid claim to the concession, but we have been working hard to circumvent him."

Heron smiled significantly. "We have a surprise in store for somebody," he said. "Cummings wanted to seize this hulk or blow the residency up, but we restrained him, and worked out a better plan. Further information might only raise premature hopes, but maintain the validity of Shotille's agreement where you can."

"Oh yes," said the mechanic, nodding like an automaton. "There is going to be some fun."

Mulgrave ended the conference by ushering Clarence into what had been the 'tween-decks and now served as court-room. At one end negroes in various stages of semi-nudity crouched, greasy and perspiring, on the planking. Several officers in uniform were seated at the other, and Markham's party were provided with chairs close by, while Clarence formally saluted a grey-haired man who sat at a table with two black soldiers standing in state behind him. This was Major Carwardine, who held powers of summary jurisdiction in that region.

Bright sunlight beat in through the ports, and quivering reflections glanced athwart the deck-beams overhead, for a wide gangway opened upon the dazzling river.

"Your name is Clarence Seaton Markham?" said the officer, referring to the papers before him. "British subject, and occupation mahogany merchant. What was your profession in England?"

"Lieutenant of ——," said Clarence, and there was a

stir among the officers, while Major Carwardine looked him over carefully.

"You are charged with entering proscribed territory, treasonably assisting in a native rising, and selling the mutineers breech-loading arms. Do you plead guilty?"

"To the first charge—yes," said Clarence. "To the others—no. Instead of assisting the mutineers, I several times barely escaped with my life from them."

The pair maintained their relative positions for a moment—the accused, dressed in white linen and duck with a broad black sash, standing stiffly upright in spite of his manifest weakness; the other, wearing an ochre-tinted tunic with silver buttons, leaning on his desk. Then the latter said, "You can take yonder chair, and while I may transfer the case to headquarters, in order to proceed as fairly as possible I will ask Captain Mulgrave to recapitulate the facts against you. You can consult with Captain Clayton if you desire."

A shrewd-looking young officer seated himself behind Clarence, and Mulgrave's curt sentences broke crisply through the silence. He deposed that in company with other white men of suspicious character, whom he believed to be present, the prisoner had visited his station under the alias of Seaton. Lieutenant Seymour was expected, but had unfortunately been upset into the river during a discussion with the black mail carrier, and the prisoner, personating him, had, after damaging some mechanical tools, departed, taking several suits of uniform with him. The said garments were nearly new, and had not been returned.

Mulgrave possessed small sense of humour, but his brother officers showed signs of merriment. Seymour looked at him reproachfully, while a smile flickered in the eyes of the soldier-judge, and Cummings chuckled as the prosecutor commented indignantly, "May I remark, sir, that I fail to see any occasion for hilarity?"

He next testified that having information from a gentleman named Smithers, who declared he acted from a sense of duty, he watched the blockaded river and chased the prisoner, who entered it under cover of darkness. He considered that if Lieutenant Seymour had not

fallen down at a critical moment he would have arrested the blockade-runner. The latter, however, showed considerable strategical skill, and escaped, while the Government steamer rammed the mangroves.

Lieutenant Seymour frowned, and Clayton laughed softly, whispering to Markham, "In plain English, you were too clever for them."

Mulgrave was an indifferent orator, but his facts were telling, and Northop Markham sat very still, while Clarence showed some anxiety as he narrated how he had seized modern rifles from negroes, who would presently testify that they obtained them from a white man's steamer at periods coinciding with the prisoner's movements, which he traced with a startling correctness. He also showed that the latter had fought for Shotille after a dispute with Okambo, and that rifles used against the Government troops had been previously supplied the latter. Indeed, each incident in the timber cutter's career, including his fortifying work, told against him, and when he concluded Clayton whispered, "So far it looks very black. With your approval, I will consult Heron."

If Mulgrave's speech was damaging, his witnesses' evidence was worse, for the muscular negroes declared through an interpreter, and some in the coast palaver, that they had seen many firearms put on board Markham's launch, besides cases which contained rifles. Others had seen the prisoner's comrade mending weapons in Shotille's village, and established the fact that a white man had landed munitions on various occasions for conveyance to both Shotille and Okambo. They had also watched the prisoner's launch steaming through unfrequented creeks. The difficulty was that with the African's vivid imagination and cheerful disregard of veracity they testified too much, and Major Carwardine sighed wearily when several in succession located the accused in widely different places at the same time, with elaborate corroborative details. It required several black soldiers to prevent one or two clawing each others' throats as they retired well satisfied with themselves, and the last magnificent specimen of muscular humanity was justified when he explained, "Them low bushman all dam lie too much."

"Some are speaking what they consider the truth, but the rest have been got at," said Heron; and, when Clayton turned upon him, added, "I don't mean by any of your people, of course, but I'm absolutely certain somebody has primed them. Sit down, Clarence. You won't make things better by exciting yourself."

The heat in the 'tween-decks was now oppressive, the savours of greasy black humanity nauseating, and Major Carwardine, who had very patiently endeavoured to sift out the truth, laid down the handkerchief he was mopping his forehead with as Clarence stood up.

"This is a travesty of justice," he said. "I protest against these perjurers being allowed to swear away a white man's liberty."

"You will be heard in turn," answered Major Carwardine sternly. "It is my part to judge the validity of the testimony."

"We only want fair play, and we'll have it, if we tackle the Prime Minister," broke in Cummings. "I'll settle with those black liars afterwards," but Markham senior beckoned to his son, and a dusky soldier dropped his rifle's heel-plate heavily upon the toe of Cummings.

"I shall take drastic measures if there is further disturbance," said Major Carwardine. "It might have been well, Captain Mulgrave, if you had included some of the accused's comrades, but that can be remedied. We will now adjourn for an hour."

It was noon when Clarence and his friends ascended to the deck, and lounged almost gasping under the quarter awning. The wind-sail ventilator hung in limp folds, for no breath of air stirred the glassy river, and even the negroes lay silent wherever they could find shade; but two sable soldiers stood erect with ordered rifles beside the gangway. Clarence ate nothing of the food set before him, and the others who did conversed in disjointed whispers, agreeing that so far the case had gone against them. Markham senior, who seemed, however, still optimistic, repeatedly glanced up river. "If the consul does not send him down under escort we must demand a postponement and hearing at Calabar," he

said to Heron. "Major Carwardine might agree to it; but we had better say nothing to Clarence meantime."

When the court resumed its sitting there was an expectant hush as agent Smithers, who appeared distinctly ill at ease, was ushered in. Perspiration, oozing from his lank hair, trickled into his eyes, and he glanced at the natives furtively, but with manifest disquietude. Before he commenced to speak Cummings, the irrepressible, rose up.

"That man is a liar and attempted murderer, sir," he said. "Couldn't speak the truth if he wanted to, which he never would——"

"Silence!" thundered Major Carwardine. "Handcuff this man, sergeant, if he speaks again."

"I have come here at considerable personal risk to discharge a patriotic duty, and I demand protection," said Smithers, nervously moistening his lips. "A—a serious danger threatens me."

"You are as safe as any of the rest of us," answered the judge, and Smithers sidled as near him as possible.

"The man is in a state of abject funk," commented Clayton.

It afterwards became clear that Smithers, having come to the end of his tether, was playing a desperately risky game to secure the concession. He told a clever story, freely admitting that he had entered the proscribed region to secure payment for goods legitimately supplied before hostilities broke out. His duty to his employers came before the care of his personal safety, he explained, and Mulgrave smiled ironically. Then he proceeded to connect Markham's movements with the landing of munitions, related how he had been made prisoner by Okambo, and forced to assist a detachment of his war boys in surprising Shotille, and solemnly charged Cummings with an attempt to assassinate him. He had watched the prisoner's movements unobserved several times, he said, and had seen him loading cases of arms into canoes. In his opinion the timber cutting was only a blind. He concluded with a modest reference to the service he had rendered the State after his escape from Okambo, and Clarence's guilt seemed certain.

Cummings sat still, partly because Heron held the back of his jacket; Northop Markham remained, considering the evidence, unusually serene; and Major Carwardine made notes in a book before him until there was an interruption. A sharp twang broke through the scratching of the judge's pen, and Smithers, leaping aside, fell heavily over a chair, for something hissed under the beams and struck quivering in the teakwood an inch or two behind the judge's head. Then a loosely draped figure plunged head-foremost out through the gangway, and there was a splash in the river. The jarring report of a Snider rifle rose from the poop, and all order was flung to the winds. The negroes clamoured, the white men ran to the gangway, and Mulgrave's voice was audible from above. "After him with the canoe, Jennings. There's his head—dived again—fire when he comes up. He'll be in among the mangroves before you get him!"

The shrill call of a bugle rang across the river, a canoe with black soldiers in it shot out into the stream, and Major Carwardine, who plucked an object from the bulkhead, stooped over Smithers.

"They've finished me," choked out the trader. "I knew they would. Can't you send for the surgeon—and brandy? I'm a dying man."

"You are only a badly frightened one," said the officer disgustedly. "The arrow is on the table. It never touched you," but Smithers sank into a chair shivering all over, and there was some excuse for him, while the distant hoot of a whistle became audible as Mulgrave descended the stairway.

"Jennings is hunting the edge of the mangroves, sir, and Hyslop has landed a dozen men, though they'll probably never get him," he said. "He swam under water like a cormorant. Phillips is bringing his launch down stream, as fast as steam can drive her, and no doubt he has the witness we asked for."

Then he picked up the insignificant arrow, and his face was grave as he glanced at the point of it, while his superior said, "Send Hyslop word to spare no effort to secure the negro. This is one of the Benue people's weapons, and new to our vicinity—shot out of a tiny

bow, but I believe a prick of it would kill a vigorous man in twenty minutes. One of us had a narrow escape just now. Was it meant for you, agent Smithers?"

"Yes," answered the latter, whose lips were bloodless. "This has been going on for some time now, and they will get me certain some day."

"We may want Mr. Smithers very shortly, sir," said Clayton, with whom Mulgrave conferred, and added to that officer, "I don't think you were quite logical about the timber."

The steamer ran alongside the landing, and while Johnston of Warrimba and Lieutenant Seymour told their stories, making them as favourable to Clarence as they could, though the deductions rather confirmed his guilt, an orderly brought in a message, and Northop Markham whispered to Heron. Then the judge turned to the prisoner.

"The district where the offences were undoubtedly committed—by somebody—is under summary martial law, and our proceedings are of necessity somewhat irregular," he said. "At present I am not concerned about the commercial interests involved, but if you will make a detailed statement I will carefully consider it."

"There is some truth in much of what has been told you, sir, which makes it harder to refute," answered Clarence. "The rest shows traces of an infamous conspiracy. I will give you my version on oath."

Clarence spoke for an hour, narrating Cummings' adventures as well as his own, and there was a change in the attitude of the official listeners. His tale sounded improbable, but the very damaging admissions he freely made and outbreaks of genuine indignation carried weight, and Major Carwardine, laying aside his note-book, scarcely moved his glance from the speaker's face.

"Can you substantiate this narrative?" he asked, and Clarence answered, "Portions of it. Certainly the actual shipping of timber. I would suggest your questioning——"

Clayton whispered to Mulgrave, who rose smiling, and Northop Markham looked grimly satisfied as the officer said, "Headman Shotille, sir."

Then, for the first time, Clarence felt hopeful, as the forest chieftain, followed by Lyle, one white officer, and several retainers, came in. Smithers thrust his chair back with a savage gesture when he saw him. Shotille shook the judge's hand, salaamed to the assembly, and, being asked if he knew Smithers and Clarence, commenced his testimony, through a coloured attendant, with a leer on his cunning face.

"I am Headman Shotille, and love all white men, but some low bushman tell lie of me," he said. "I savvy them two plenty—that one Smithy dam low t'ief too much. Dun sell me rifle no fit to go off, sah; dun sell me cartridge with no powder in him, and gin halluf water."

Smithers collapsed, and for a few moments lay huddled in his chair, watching Shotille with murder in his eyes, while the latter, enjoying his triumph, beamed upon him. Then Smithers pulled himself together, saying, "You will not believe a word of this rascal's, sir. He has encouraged human sacrifice. I can prove it. He sold me the timber concession after selling it to the other men, and infamously swindled me. I——"

"You are a witness against the prisoner Markham. We cannot go into outside issues now, and may dispense with your presence in the meantime," said Major Carwardine.

"When rogues fall out the truth appears," observed Captain Mulgrave aside, and Northop Markham said, "As another case may result from this, will you notice, gentlemen, he admitted bargaining for our property—after—the headman had parted with it?"

Major Cawardine demanded silence, but there was another interruption, for a practically naked black man, seeing Smithers about to retire in charge of an officer, stood up. "I want my cloff-piece, sah," he said. "Them white man swear he dun give me four cloff-piece for tell about them gun bokus!"

The negro stuck to his story, and Major Carwardine said, "See him secured and fed until to-morrow, Seymour, and Mr. Smithers bestowed in safe quarters."

Then the agent was led away protesting incoherently, and Shotille recommenced. He explained that malicious

persons had defamed his character, but he had come forward to offer Major Phillips the assistance of his army in capturing Okambo, after which he narrated, for the most part truthfully, Cummings' visit and all his dealings with Markham's party. The latter he declared had not supplied him with a single weapon, though he admitted receiving many from Smithers in return for the right to cut timber. Shotille's remarks, however, became very indefinite here, and he complained of a bad memory. Then, to the interest of the Government officers, he narrated how Smithers, after commencing an arms traffic with Okambo, betrayed him to his enemy. It was, for Shotille, a remarkably clear story, excepting the portion which related to the second sale of the concession, and when several of his followers corroborated it, Major Carwardine, after asking questions and referring to his notes, said—

"You have taken commendable pains, Captain Mulgrave, and I consider the testimony of your witnesses proves that arms have been largely sold by a European. That the said European was the accused did not appear equally clear, and a portion of the evidence would apply to Smithers. Headman Shotille's story, however, throws fresh light upon it, and would establish Markham's innocence if it deserves credence. I consider that it does, in which you will, I think, agree with me."

There was a murmur of approval, and the judge concluded, "We therefore exchange one prisoner for another, and in the meantime it is my duty to acquit you, Markham, of all the charges except the first, for which I shall inflict a financial penalty. It is a serious matter for any private persons to fire upon a native, but it has been long established by precedent that a civilian may defend his life against armed aggressors. I accordingly hold you blameless."

Thereupon Seymour, stepping forward, with Johnston close behind, publicly shook Clarence's hand, after which the latter said, "I must thank you for a fair hearing, sir, but my liberty is of less value than the safety of the concession. May I ask your permission to return to it?"

"You shall have it shortly," was the answer. "It is safe meanwhile, and if Mr. Smithers claims an injunction

against you I shall refer him to Calabar. I, however, hardly consider such action probable."

Then the court broke up, and when Cummings and Lyle between them hustled Clarence up on deck Northop Markham said, "Thank Heaven, that is over, and the concession safe. It was Shotille saved us, but I was desperately anxious until I saw the astute old rascal. It was a case of diamond cut diamond, and Smithers over-reached himself when he played him false. The fool must have been drunk or mad to venture here at all."

"Congratulate you, Mr. Markham!" said Captain Mulgrave. "Had my suspicions from the beginning, and used you to some extent as a stalking horse. Wish to invite you and the rest to make free of our mess. It is your duty to accept, to show you don't bear us any ill-feeling, and because we owe you a debt for treating Seymour well. We should also appreciate further details of your unauthorised campaign."

"I won't sit at the same table with Smithers," said Cummings, when the rest agreed; and Mulgrave answered drily, "You will not be asked to. Mr. Smithers is at the moment reposing in our substitute for gaol."

The combined party spent a convivial evening, and about the time Clarence insisted on starting for the Silver River Mulgrave and his subaltern entered the quarters of Smithers. They were on the ground floor of the residence ashore. It was late, but the trader still sat under a lamp with a revolver on the table before him beside a liqueur bottle, and Mulgrave glanced significantly at Seymour as he saw his face. It was livid, and dewed with great drops of sweat.

"You had better give me that pistol, in case it goes off and kills somebody by accident," he said, picking up the weapon.

"No. Curse you!" cried the trader. "I'm not such a fool as that, and I must—I will have it. If you take it away my blood will be on your head."

"What rubbish is this?" asked Mulgrave. "Drinking too much of that stuff has addled your brain;" but the trader whined in a maudlin fashion until he said hoarsely, "They are coming for me. Listen!"

His terror was so apparent that both officers did so, and heard only the soft pat-pat of a sentry's naked feet, diminishing as he paced beneath the verandah. "What did you hear?" asked Seymour, a trifle uneasily.

"A frog," answered Smithers. "But it wasn't a real frog. I—well, I offended some of those devil-priests up yonder; they put Ju-Ju on me, and are hunting me down with merciless cunning. You saw what happened, and there's another assassin lurking round here."

Mulgrave flung the door open, and pointed to the approaching sentry, whose rifle twinkled in a beam of light. He also blew softly into a silver whistle, and another armed man appeared beside the landing.

"You see. You are perfectly safe," he said. "Better put away that bottle, and go to sleep."

"Sleep!" whined Smithers. "I haven't slept decently for nights and nights. You don't know what it is to meddle with fetich treasure. Nobody believes in magic, and I usen't to, but those brutes are too clever for common mortals. By God, I'll haunt you if you don't give me back my pistol."

Mulgrave dropped the weapon on the table. "Take it if it will comfort you," he said. "You're not a nice man, Smithers, but I'm rather sorry for you, knowing what I know. I'll send one of my best scouts along."

He was turning away, when the trader called him back. "One of you will stay, just a little while," he said. "Stay and finish this bottle. It's the genuine article. It would be a charity."

"Sorry we can't," said Mulgrave quietly, and Smithers, changing from an attitude of supplication, turned upon him in sudden fury.

"You're too damned nice to drink with a poor devil of a trader who had no choice between starvation and hell," he said. "I wasn't born with your strength and courage, taught everything, and fed on the best. One doesn't grow strong and valiant starving on scraps in the gutter, but I've been into places and done things that men with twice your courage never will. Hell! if I'd had a tenth of your chances I'd have been a General."

"It's almost a pity you took the risks," said Mulgrave, who withdrew, carefully locking the door behind him.

"That man has the fear of death upon him, and it is possible he is partly justified," he commented. "Sergeant Koffee, keep two men patrolling until morning under the verandah. They are to fire upon any black man crawling near that door."

Mulgrave, who retired to his rest, was awakened early next morning by the sergeant, who said that the key had been stolen mysteriously, and no answer could be obtained from the prisoner. He at once awakened the surgeon, and five minutes later he and Major Carwardine waited outside the door while two Yorubas broke it in. Then they stood aghast on the threshold, for Smithers lay within, huddled together and staring at them with glassy eyes. The revolver lay beside him, his body was twisted, and his swollen face was not good to look upon.

"Strangulation!" said the surgeon presently. "No trace of abrasions, but those bush priests' assassins are very skilful murderers. Ah, one cartridge missed fire; here's the dint of the striker. He evidently tried to make a fight of it!"

"Poor devil!" said Captain Mulgrave. "I'm glad I gave him back the pistol, but I'm afraid we shall never unravel the mystery. The Government doesn't take supernatural powers into consideration, but it's my opinion that if we had locked him in a steel safe they'd have got at him."

"It's curious," said Cummings, who joined the group. "Twice I did my best to put an end to him myself, and now I'd give a good deal to get hold of the men who killed him. After all, it mayn't have been his fault. Some folks don't get no chances, and this cursed country is too much for them."

So Smithers died, and was buried, and only his enemy made excuse for him, while a day or two later Major Carwardine said to Markham senior, "He left no papers bearing on the concession of any kind, and it is therefore impossible for anybody to dispute your claim, especially as Shotille recognises it. You can return at your discretion after formally recording it."

## XXX

### THE DECISION REVERSED

It was in a state of mental exaltation that Florence Ellory was ushered into the presence of the head of the mission district when at last the day on which she must confirm her application to be sent to Kangana arrived. It was a lowering day. A stagnant atmosphere charged with electricity oppressed the Europeans who breathed it, and great drops of moisture falling at irregular intervals set up a spasmodic drumming on the iron roof of the station. She had made her decision some time ago. It was the consummation of the sacrifice she desired to make, and a way to the realisation of the splendid, if somewhat uncertain hopes which had led her to Africa, and yet she could not overcome a shrinking she was ashamed of. She told herself it was the rebellion of worldly instincts or a physical weakness due to the weather, and it may have been more than either.

The elderly man regarded her searchingly as she seated herself, noticing the faint quiver of her lips as well as the flush in the centre of each hollow cheek. He sighed as he did so, for the mental struggle had as it were etherealised Florence, adding lustre to her eyes and enhancing her fragile beauty when under the influence of excitement. She had come to demand what might well prove her death-warrant, and he was reluctant to grant it.

"You still wish to go to Kangana?" he asked, and added, when Florence bent her head, "Then I may not say no, but again I must warn you. Kangana is practically cut off from civilisation, and those who go there must of necessity abandon all that binds them to the rest of the world and look for no respite from trial, sickness, and a loneliness that the weak would break down under. There is a need of help at Kangana, but whoever we send must go with single purpose—leaving everything behind them. Do you understand this?"

"I do," said Florence, and the missionary's tone was rather grave than approving.

"In that case you may start up river with Mrs. Johnston and myself to-morrow, and, if the surgeon at Ilama considers it justifiable, continue the journey. I will defer advice and instructions until you have seen him. Meantime, I wish to ask you——"

They sat by the open window, looking out upon the river as they talked. On the opposite side the folds of the red ensign hung motionless from a flagstaff over the Markham factory. A long, black-hulled mail boat lay abreast of it, winches rattling and steam roaring aloft in a feathery column from behind her tall funnel, and presently a surf-boat load of clamorous Africans were paddled off to the vessel. A tall white man went with them, and Florence started, fancying she recognised Lyle. She watched them with eager interest as the negroes clambered up the ladder, passing many boxes and cases to one another. They had been paid in kind, even more than they covenanted for.

"Markham's Krooboys going home," said the missionary, glad to change the subject, with a curious pathos in his tone. "One can understand their satisfaction, even if to most of us there can be no going home except perhaps to die. The whole story of that concession seems a romantic one, and one cannot help conceding that the Markhams acted honourably. Their confirmation of the promise not to extend the gin traffic into that region was an unexpected relief. You perhaps heard of the tragic end of their opponent, the real author of the mischief."

There were reasons why Florence had not, and Mrs. Johnston, who had acted as she thought for the best, was connected with them, so the missionary related what had passed at the trial, news of which had come to hand that day. Florence only knew that Markham was acquitted.

"Even here, good is stronger than evil, and in its own time retribution must overtake those who do the latter," he concluded, rather as one thinking aloud than for the benefit of his companion, as he glanced at the other factories across the river. "And yet the blame may not have been all Smithers'. Punishment has overtaken him, but what of the others whose greed drove him to his

doom? It was said that blindness recurred for generations among the descendants of those who grew rich by shipping Guinea slaves, and, for there is a certain truth in all superstition, it may be a curse will follow the money he earned—blood money, very literally."

Florence returned to her own quarters in a troubled state of mind, but thankful the head of the district had exonerated Clarence Markham. She would never see him again, but she was glad to remember him as an honest man. Then, for the continued strain had tried her severely, she buried her face in her hands when a roar of negro voices and the boom of the mail gun announced the homeward-bound steamer's departure. As she had heard, there would be no going home for her until the pangs of fever opened the gates of a better country.

Next day Clarence Markham arrived in hot haste, a free man, at the station, hoping against hope that Florence's decision might not be irrevocable, and, as fate ordained it, found Mrs. Johnston, who had seen his canoe, waiting to receive him. She grasped the reason for his visit, and, because there was a certain hard kindness in her, determined to shield Florence from another trial.

"Miss Ellory is not here. You cannot see her," she said in answer to his question, and Markham turned upon her with ill-concealed anger in his eyes.

"I must see her, madame, even at the risk of offending you by remaining until she returns. Pardon the plain speaking, but it is of vital importance to me that I should speak to her."

"Try to listen to sound advice," said the lady coldly, "and I will try to show you why you should not. You are a headstrong man, Mr. Markham, and I know there would be nothing gained by directly thwarting you; therefore I will explain frankly. To begin with, your wishes regarding Miss Ellory have been plain. You desire to take her away from us."

"Yes," said Clarence sternly. "I desire to make Miss Ellory my wife."

"That would be a wrong, as I endeavoured to make

you understand before—both to yourself and her. She has dedicated herself solely to this service, and if you tempted her to desert it she would, for I know her nature, always carry with her a sense of shame. It would cloud her happiness, and you would suffer with her. Do not interrupt me. There is a more convincing reason."

Clarence's lips were tight set, and his forehead contracted, but he checked the caustic answer, and listened with dismay as the speaker continued, "You are too late; Miss Ellory will never return. She has already commenced the journey to Kangana, and nothing that you could say would turn her back now. But you might cause her distress, and, for I think you have some generosity, you would not do that uselessly. Can you not realise what this decision must have cost her and refrain, when it cannot be reversed, from paining her?"

"Too late!" the man repeated. "She has gone to Kangana? It is your work, madame, and—for it is comforting to believe, in spite of some of its exponents, that there is truth in your teaching—some day you will have to answer for sending that poor child there. Heaven knows, I would spare her sorrow; but I am going on to overtake them, and say a last good-bye to her."

He went out shakily, with a drawn, white face, for his weakness still clung to him, and there was pity as well as chagrin in Mrs. Johnston's eyes as she watched him.

Florence was seen by a skilful Government surgeon, who assisted the missionaries as he assisted the tribesmen over and above his duty, which was sufficiently onerous. He was one of the men who have freely given their best for Africa, and there are many of them. He only looked at her steadily for a minute, asked a few questions, and then signified that the interview was over, for he was curt to rudeness. But he said to the missionary—

"That girl will surely die if you send her to Kangana, and, further, I won't answer for her life if she stays any longer in Africa. You take good care of the black men, and they're not always grateful—haven't folks of your own colour some value too? That child, for she is a

child, has mortified the flesh to the verge of extinction, and it's certain that while she might make an interesting martyr she never will be a West Coast teacher. She must go back at once to England—and stay there. A lengthy rest, common-sense manner of living, and a little brightness may restore her."

The missionary broke the news to Florence, and, for she looked very young and pitiful, stroked her hair in fatherly fashion as he concluded, "After all, there is much to do at home, and it may be Providence has another task already waiting for you."

He left Florence in a state of utter dejection. She had failed, and her reflections were very bitter. Then she remembered what she had cast away—the love of a man now freed from all suspicion and the shelter of a home. She had perhaps spoiled his life, too, for she could not forget the despair in his face when she told him she was going to Kangana—and all the sacrifice had been made in vain.

It was a dismal day, and Florence spent the rest of it alone in a bare, mildewed room, which looked down upon as foul a waste of quagmires as may be found between the Congo and the Gambia, and it needs robust health and a cheerful mind to contemplate most of them with equanimity. Beyond the thick yellow water, oily and foul-smelling, endless belts of bubbling ooze striped by sad-coloured mangroves stretched away, and sombre cloud brooded heavily over the haze of deadly steam that rose from them. The lamp had been lighted when the Reverend Peter Johnston came in. He noticed the girl's dejection, and said—

"I have heard the report, and you must understand it in the right way when I say that I am not wholly sorry. I have sometimes wondered whether you were fit for this hard life—or rather, if the life were fit for you. That doesn't sound right, does it? but everybody's talents are not the same, and if rigid restraint of one's self is beneficial—and, of course, we know it is—one can have too much of it. Some people expand and can do their best work in an atmosphere of brightness. I mean, that is——"

Johnston's evident desire to console her and fear of committing himself threatened between them to involve him hopelessly, for he was at no time a brilliant speaker, and even then Florence smiled faintly as she asked, "Can one have too much of it?"

"Of course," said Johnston. "I mean under circumstances. One must never confound reason and nonsense, and there is a good deal of the latter in this world. Suppose I wanted my dinner and gave it instead to somebody more hungry, that would be doing good. Suppose I flung it away untasted, just to see if I could, that would be folly."

The speaker, who while he had done the former often at Mahogany Camp, had never been guilty of the latter form of foolishness, paused with the air of one who had made a point before he continued, "So you see, my dear, when it is impossible for you to benefit anybody by suffering here you should be thankful. You have no right to despise health, happiness, and security, when they are offered you. Is it not as good, for instance, for a woman to be a faithful wife as a——"

Johnston ceased, remembering he was not discussing the question for the benefit of a general audience, but one young woman in particular, and that he was venturing on distinctly dangerous ground. So, abandoning the *rôle* of expounder, which seldom became him, he adopted that of sympathetic friend, which generally did, and patted Florence's shoulder as he said—

"My dear, we shall be very sorry to part with you, but you may be sure another and perhaps happier lot is meant for you; if so, do not turn away from it foolishly. I told you how, when he lay dying, poor Hilary thought of you—and I think he gave similar counsel in the letter he sent you."

Johnston withdrew, leaving Florence comforted, with Hilary Legh's last letter in her hand. The men she most respected had each and all said the same thing, but there was an earnestness for her happiness in the dead man's message, and a great unselfishness, that had already caused suspicious blurs upon the paper. Still, Florence did not sleep that night, and a fresh care troubled her.

She would land in England penniless, and England is a hard country for the poor.

It was yet early next morning when Clarence Markham, landing, met Johnston outside the little rickety residence.

"I have come to say good-bye to Miss Ellory before she goes to Kangana," he said; and Johnston, who seemed troubled, smiled dubiously as he answered, "You might have spared yourself the journey. She is going home to England instead of Kangana. The doctor has declared she must leave Africa."

"Thank God!" said Markham; and when Johnston coughed deprecatingly added, "The words are strictly justifiable, if she is not ill. You don't know what this news mean to me."

Johnston must have been singularly unobservant if he failed to guess, for Markham's face was radiant. Then, as though hardly venturing to credit the tidings, the latter repeated, "You said she was going home to England instead of Kangana? I must see her immediately."

"I did, but you cannot see her," answered Johnston drily.

Markham's face grew intent. "You and I were good friends, and I wouldn't like to hurt your feelings," he said.

Johnston smiled, and his eyes were kindly. "We shall, I hope, be good friends still. I am in some degree Miss Ellory's guardian, and must ask your object in seeking her."

"There is no reason why I should hide it. I intend to ask Miss Ellory to marry me. That may help you to understand many things, and you have the whole secret now."

The twinkle deepened in Johnston's eyes, for he was very human. "Your tactics resemble those of the ostrich, and it was a very open secret," he said. "We were comrades in hunger and peril behind the stockade, and for that reason you must go away directly."

"Why?" asked Clarence, showing his bewilderment; and Johnston glanced at him shrewdly: "Because anything else would not be considerate. The news came as a heavy shock to her, and it will take her a long time to get over it. Disappointments assume huge proportions when one is young, you know."

"That is sufficient, but there is something else. What is it? I am sick of suspense and mystery;" and Johnston answered with evident reluctance, "Can't you discover it for yourself? You are too impulsive. Precipitancy is always to be deprecated. Fortitude, reflection, and patience, my dear sir—I'm not in the pulpit now, you say? Well, if you will have it, and force me—there is in human nature a quality called pride. Pride that impelled the mother of the—who was it—to sacrifice——"

"You are a very good fellow. It's the most expressive term I can think of," said Clarence, wringing the missionary's hand. "You are right, too, and I must once more possess my soul in patience. Oh, patience be—— I mean obliterated. In Africa one has to exercise so much of it. Well, I will disappear, and if you are going to Warrimba I want to say that whenever we meet again, and I hope it won't be in Africa, we shall meet as staunch comrades. My dear sir, since you kept us alive on nothing when we stewed and fought together behind the stockade we'll never forget you."

He limped back to his canoe; and a somewhat portly figure, surmounted by a sun helmet ridiculously too small and coughing vigorously as it waved a hand to him, was the last he ever saw of Johnston of Warrimba.

A few weeks passed, and one afternoon Florence, wrapped in a shawl, for the sea breeze blew fresh and deliciously cool, lay in a cane lounge beside the deck-house of an ocean steamer anchored in a creek some distance from the Silver River. She had travelled there on board an unsavoury oil launch in company with Mr. and Mrs. Johnston, who were now ready to depart again.

"We start to-night for Warrimba," said the former. "It may still become a great station, and we will write you often and report our progress. We must pass the tidal creeks on the flood, and it is hard to say good-bye, but we both wish you every blessing, and hope you won't forget your friends in Africa. Isn't that so, Marian?"

Mrs. Johnston did not answer him, but stooped and kissed the girl. "We are sorry to lose you, and if ever I spoke harshly it was, or so it seemed to me, for your good," she said. "Perhaps I blundered—the best of us often do

—but you will believe me when I say that we trust there may be many good things in store for you."

They descended the ladder, and Florence felt lonely when the launch steamed away. She was going home, but her friends were few and poor, and she knew it is hard enough for the vigorous to win a sustenance in the over-crowded mother country. She also remembered with what brave aspirations she had left it, and now she was going back, as too many had done before, crushed with disappointment and broken in health. Another thought troubled her. She had neither seen nor heard from Clarence Markham since the day she left him a prisoner, and, though that romance was over, it seemed unkind that he had not even sent her a farewell message. She longed strangely for a last word with him, not knowing that soon after leaving the vessel the launch passed a little steamer sweeping seawards through a whirl of hurled-up foam, whose helmsman saluted the missionaries.

"That is Markham, surely. I still find it hard to forgive him," said Mrs. Johnston. "It is curious we should meet him here. Is it possible he can be going to the mail boat?"

"Of course he is going there," said Johnston, who had been gazing up stream expectantly. "It is, as you say, somewhat curious, my dear."

"It is distinctly suspicious," said Mrs. Johnston angrily. "I never approved of his evident admiration for Florence. Indeed, I tried to quench it, and now at the last, when she has wisely forgotten him, he has stolen a march on me. I wonder who could have told him."

Johnston, who might have enlightened her, did not, and his spouse was left to wonder.

It was not long afterwards when Florence, who had allowed the purser to move her lounge into the shade of a big lifeboat as the sun crept round, started at the sight of a white man who hurriedly climbed the companion. He glanced around him at the head of it, and then came straight towards her.

"At last, and just in time," he said. "I have something to say to you, Florence—and fate was against me, or it should have been said before. Much has changed

since I last saw you, and now I am a free man, with the right to speak. Florence, I have waited and waited—is it too late?"

He leaned against the stanchion supporting the lifeboat chocks, while as he spoke with intense earnestness his vigour returned to him, and with a trace of his old masterfulness he touched the listener's shoulder, forcing her to look up at him. The three men Florence had looked to for guidance had each in his own fashion already answered the question for her as she longed to, and one, who rested from his labours far off in the forest, very plainly. Still surrender implied the abandoning of ideals some of which seemed still possible to attain to, though she had commenced to wonder whether the rest were not delusions, and so she struggled with herself until the man repeated his question huskily, but with a certain imperious demand for an answer.

"Is it too late? Since the day the Cavally nigger snatched the shawl from you I have waited and waited for the chance of winning you."

Then suddenly the struggle ended, and she yielded, not to a weakness, as she once had thought, but rising to a clearer conception of the dignity of humanity, and for a few seconds a clear rose colour flushed the wax-like skin and her eyes shone. "It is not too late," she said.

There was nobody on that particular portion of the saloon deck, and if there had been the lifeboat served as shield, and presently Clarence said quietly, "Heaven helping me, you shall never regret it, darling, and now you must listen to an explanation which is due not to me, but you."

Florence did so, showing eager interest in the tale, and she smiled upon him as he concluded, "So I dared not turn traitor to those who depended for so much on me, and, because I am not a brilliant schemer, did what seemed my best for them. I hated myself for it—and felt ashamed before you—but I could not fail them. Then for your sake I kept silent—how could any man with that charge hanging over him speak of love to you? You must try to forget it, Florence, and you need not change your vocation. The missionaries don't monopolise every

opening for doing good, and you will find much that needs improving in your husband."

The girl regarded him with pity, and then made answer shyly as Markham bent over the chair, "Poor Clarence! Still, if you had spoken earlier I might not have listened. I thought that love was a thing to guard against. Now I seem to know it is power and life and completeness—and you have taught me."

A bell tinkled forward, the windlass commenced to rattle as it shortened the clanking cable home, and when the bell called again Markham walked towards the gangway with Florence's hand upon his arm.

"I have many things to finish, but I shall join you soon," he said. "You will meantime think of me often and every day?" and as he turned to go down the ladder Florence half-whispered, "Heaven bless you and keep you safe from all danger until I hold your hand again."

## XXXI

### THE FRUITS OF VICTORY

It was a sunny day in England when Northop and Clarence Markham discussed important questions of business policy with several gentlemen largely interested in the palm oil trade, in the former's head office. The merchant had suffered little from his trip to the fever coast, and already Clarence was recovering his health, while both were in excellent spirits. Nevertheless, the younger man's pallid skin and languidness marked him as one who had sweltered too long in Africa, and the frock-coat with the flower in its button-hole fitted him loosely. He lay back in a big armchair with an appreciation of its comfort unknown to him before, listening while the assembled merchants explained their views. They had gathered from several cities, and either owned or were concerned in the management of trading factories scattered by muddy river mouth and roaring beach along the whole African

coast. All agreed that there had been an unexpected revival in the industries consuming palm oil, but there was a difference of opinion as to the marketing of that commodity.

"There are a number of small men with petty stocks on hand," said one. "Still, between us we are practically masters of the position, and the rest are waiting to follow our lead. Their stand-off attitude has helped to rush prices up. After the river combination's recent efforts we're tolerably sick of trying to cut each other's throats, and it's an open secret that several of us have bled severely during the process. Therefore we prefer concerted action, and hope you will consider us as allies during the rest of your campaign. That expresses your views, gentlemen?"

"Exactly," said another. "Add to it that the Syndicate has, for Mr. Markham's special benefit, been making bear contracts at prices which practically amount to giving oil away. Also the fact that, besides holding a fair proportion of the available stock, Markham's agents and our own have goods-supplied-in-advance agreements with native producers for most of their output, and it becomes evident that the Amalgamation can't well fill them without buying from us."

"It's rumoured that several headmen on the rivers, having been pinched too severely by the Amalgamation's agents, have repudiated their promises to deliver oil," interposed a third. "Two of their largest suppliers were among them. No doubt, we should have been forced to sell at any figure they offered but for this providential revival of trade, and the fact they overlooked, that the bushman starts out on the warpath or goes fishing when he finds he can't gather palm nuts at a profit. You are all, however, aware of that, and our purpose is to decide how we're going to treat the Amalgamation. Personally, when anybody has made me lose—well, I hardly care to say how much—I feel like smashing them."

The rest of the company expressed sympathy with the speaker, but their comments ceased when Markham held up a number of market reports.

"Tinplates, soap, candles, etc., all booming just now," he said. "Somewhat naturally, I feel tempted to pul-

verise my late rivals, too, but we have to consider—will it pay? The first question is, do any of us hold oil or native agreements for a sufficient quantity to enable us to retire from business after this one coup?"

"No," said most of the rest, after which Markham continued, with a flicker of amusement in his eyes.

"Then we must beware of killing the goose that lays the golden eggs. There are many kinds of oil in the world, and if we force up prices abnormally it is within the power of modern chemistry to find a substitute. Commercial history proves that it is seldom wise to tax the manufactures you live by too severely, and my advice is—don't push prices more than a few pounds beyond the average level. That should give most of us a handsome profit, and otherwise several lean years may follow a single fat one."

"But it would let the Amalgamation out," said one dissentient voice among the murmurs of concurrence; and Markham answered drily, "I hardly think so. They have sold freely at considerably below the average, so, while the general trade won't suffer much, it's probable they will."

There was further discussion before a workable scheme was drawn up, and when the rest departed three remained. "We're open to take a certain amount of stock in your new Timber Company. We'll subscribe right off if you'll let us in at a small discount," said one. "These concessions are confoundedly risky, but the fact is, whatever you take in hand turns up trumps. You have the devil's own luck."

Markham laughed. "I don't know that it is all due to luck," he said. "My son, the new managing director, could assure you that more than good fortune is requisite. In any case, we need hardly go to the public at all, as the stock is almost over-applied for already. Clarence, you might explain your prospects."

"Timber isn't like gold or diamonds. It's a cheap commodity and hard to make a fortune out of," interposed another man; and Clarence answered, "Precisely; but, as of course you know, when it must be rolled long distances over skids, or necessitates the driving of costly roads to get it out, and then must be towed off through a smother of boiling surf, the cost reduces the profit. Our trees line

the bank of a deep river, and all we have to do is to tow them down stream for shipment in dead smooth water, which of course makes all the difference. We'll assign you a few shares at par to-day. You'll have to pay a premium presently."

The bargain was settled, and when the purchasers departed Northop Markham lighted a cigar with much satisfaction. "All going well, Clarence—couldn't go better," he said. "This is going to be a busy day, and all we have to do for the next few months is to sit still and take the money. It is refreshing after a protracted course of doing the opposite. Would you ring the bell for Thompson?"

The cashier came in, and, answering a question, added complacently, "Here is another bundle of applications for the new company's shares, and a list of remittances sent in to its bankers. I would like Evans transferred to my department, sir. I can hardly keep up with the work, and haven't handled so much money since I entered your service. Marston left word there was a public scene between two of the Amalgamation's men in the Gothic Buildings this morning. One denounced the whole thing as a swindle and the other either smashed his hat or tore his collar."

"It was very unseemly of them," said Markham with sardonic humour, and added, when the cashier vanished, "It is the beginning of the end, and we'll have some of them round here presently. I wish they would come, for we must catch the train to the north this afternoon. I'm getting old, Clarence, and find triumph takes more out of me than defeat used to do, while, considering who is awaiting you at Thornton, you will appreciate a few days' holiday. You found more than mahogany in Africa. I never saw your mother take so to anybody, which does not always happen in such cases, you know."

"Yes," said Clarence, with a swift gleam of pleasure in his eyes. "Far more than all the mahogany between Goree and Angola; but it pleases me most that you approve of her, sir."

Markham laughed. "I wonder whether it would have made much difference if I had not; but I'm glad I do

approve of Miss Ellory in every way. It's true she is penniless, but having worked, perhaps too hard, to pile up money all my life, and not always successfully, I know that there are better things than gold and silver. Besides, if all goes well, you will have quite enough for two. It will be under favourable auspices you commence life together—dear me, it's only three weeks to-day."

Clarence resumed the reading of a letter from missionary Johnston, satisfied. It related his instalment at Warrimba, and expressed great hopes for the future, besides stating that King Shotille, having made promises of amendment, had been reinstated by the Protectorate, and was conducting himself as a model of virtue. The reader sighed as well as smiled over it, for he had brought back with him a tinge of melancholy. He laid it down as another visitor, in whom he recognised one of the leaders of the Amalgamation, was shown in.

"We may as well come straight to the point, Markham," said the new arrival. "We want oil immediately, as you know. How much over the prices we formerly offered you are you going to ask us?"

"Twenty per cent.," said the merchant, watching him grimly.

"It's robbery," answered the other, spreading out his hands with a deprecatory gesture. "Are you building yourself a castle? Now, can't you listen to reason? We——"

"I could make it fifty," said Markham, "and I would but that it might break up a good many innocent people who have a right to existence."

"There are other brands than the Horse. We know what you're holding, but there are several steamers full coming along, and we could get as good stuff from the other people."

"Have you tried them?" and Markham's tone was caustic, while the visitor's slight start betrayed him. "Of course you have. Well, next time you work round that way it will cost you a pound a ton extra. In any case, they couldn't sell you the Horse N. M. C., which your best customers have tied you to. It's tolerably evident the pull lies with me. I know every card you hold perfectly."

"Then it's no use kicking," answered the other. "I quite believe you do. I'll send in a contract to-morrow, and——" but here the speaker's chagrin mastered him, "I wish I'd taken your advice and let the whole condemned combine go."

He flung out of the room, and again Markham chuckled as he observed, "That fellow hasn't nerve enough for the game. He'll go back and swear at his confederates, and I'm much inclined to think there'll be a general break-up very shortly."

"Young man from the West Coast, sir!" announced a clerk, putting his head inside the door. "Won't give up his card—says you'll know him when you see him."

The young man was shown in, and Clarence glanced at his father with quiet amusement as he said, "This is an honour we did not expect. What can we do for you, Mr. Wilkinson?"

The young trader was palpably anxious, but he had not lost all his jauntiness. "I considered you were neither of you the men to remember little mistakes against one, and I had to do my best for the folks who paid me," he said. "Now they've sent me home after a difference of opinion; they're reducing salaries all round, and I thought I'd like to offer you my services. Heron can't find a good man for the Salvador Creek factory. Of course, you will remember me?"

"It was very kind," answered the merchant with grim humour. "I remember you well. You were the gentleman who described me as a poisoner, and I think also a robber. Now, when your employers are losing money, you prudently determine to desert them."

"You are quite mistaken, sir," answered Wilkinson, with an attempt at dignity which tickled Clarence. "I could have stood the reduced salary. Our people at home don't know, and I'm not going to give secrets away, but, though I'm not over-particular, the chief of our district has started on a course I can't follow him in. One must draw the line somewhere for his own preservation, and the end of poor Smithers was a lesson to me. You needn't believe me unless you want to."

"H'm!" said Markham. "Now then, answer me,"

and after several questions he concluded, "Come back a week to-day, and I may have decided about that factory."

"I think he will do," said Clarence, when Wilkinson departed. "He is staunch enough and enterprising too. I would like you to give him the Salvador factory."

There was a constant coming and going of customers during the next hour, and then Northop Markham rose with a sigh of relief. "It has been a record day, and I can't help concluding that another month will see the end of the Amalgamation," he said. "We have earned our brief holiday, and I'll overtake you at the Club on my way to the station."

He did so, and it happened that while the pair were whirled swiftly northwards towards the high brown sweep of moorlands and scarred heights of the fells, Lyle, who had preceded them, paced up and down the lawn before Thornton Hall. He and Dane had remained in Africa after the others until European assistance could be sent to Cummings, who refused to leave the concession. It was a tranquil evening, and though the shadows deepened in the hollows of the fells a riband of water still sparkled among the alders in the few level meadows. To Lyle the cool freshness and grandeur of the hills were glorious. Though the six weeks' homeward voyage along the sun-scorched coast had brought the bronze back to his skin, he was hardly the stalwart man who left England, and was evidently nervously impatient. Hilda Markham, who stood beside him, perhaps guessed the reason, for she cast a sidelong glance of approving scrutiny at him as she said, "They cannot be long, and Eveline will be surprised to see you. We had all expected you would have waited for Clarence and father."

"Miss Lonsdale is quite well?" said Lyle; and Lucy Markham laughed as she answered, "You must judge for yourself; she certainly appears so. Do you know you have asked that question twice already?"

The man moved a step or two across the lawn, then stopped as though listening. "I may have done. Out there the inquiry isn't a mere matter of form, and perhaps the habit sticks to one. People get sick and die so quickly,

in that country. I got tired of the town, and this place is—but I hear wheels, don't you?"

"No," said Lucy Markham. "I hear nothing unless it is the prosaic but necessary bread van. You have a weakness for hearing things, and if they drive round by Lang Ghyll they might not be here for an hour."

This time, however, Lyle's ears had not deceived him, for a rhythmic beat of hoofs, jingle of harness, and rattle of wheels grew nearer, and as a trap swung out from beneath the firs Eveline Lonsdale suddenly tightened her grip on the reins. A tall man with sun-darkened skin stood beside the Misses Markham, awaiting her on the lawn. Still she pulled the horse up neatly, and expressed her thanks when he held out a big hand to help her down; then stood a moment beside him with cheeks ruddy from the touch of the breeze and a few loose, fair tresses straggling from under the brim of her hat. Lyle remembered that he had never seen Eveline tired or languid.

"We are glad to see you home, evidently so little the worse for your adventures, but one of your African friends is waiting your assistance," she said, with outward indifference though her heart beat fast, and passed on with Hilda, leaving the man to help Florence down. The colour had crept back into Florence's cheeks, and to anybody else she might have appeared delicately pretty, but Lyle, who greeted her with an inherent kindliness which came natural to him, scarcely saw her. He had looked forward to the meeting with Eveline during many a long night vigil in the steam of the swamps, and now, though he knew it was unreasonable, felt slightly chilled by it.

How he spent the next half-hour he was never sure, though he fancied he talked disjointedly to Florence, who seemed astonished at some of his sage remarks, but escaping at last he found Eveline near a low-branching cedar at the foot of the lawn. She was bareheaded and looking down into the darkening valley with thoughtful eyes, but she turned with a slightly heightened colour at his approach, knowing exactly what he wanted.

Now Lyle, being painfully conscious of his bluntness, had spent some time considering what he should say, and had actually discovered one or two metaphors which

pleased him; but when he stood face to face with their intended recipient he straightway forgot them, which was probably no great pity.

So he commenced stolidly, "You will remember, Miss Lonsdale, how you told me some of the things that would make you happy. A horse, a house resembling this, and concerts, wasn't it? Well, I said you should have them, and went out to Africa to find them. I haven't exactly brought them back with me, but——"

He ceased, for, possibly because there are individuals who under tension find a distorted humour in the most serious situations, Eveline, who could by no means help it, positively laughed. "How could you bring an Elizabethan house and concerts back from Africa?" she asked.

"You said such things would please you," continued Lyle, with unheeding earnestness, and, ashamed of the laugh as well as impressed by his primitive and unquestioning devotion, Eveline blushed unmistakably.

"Don't; it isn't kind. I never really wanted them," she said.

Lyle looked at her with a puzzled air. "Then I am almost sorry we troubled to keep out the bushmen one night. I went away to look for them, and while it was not possible to get quite all——"

"Don't," repeated Eveline. "Did you really think a horse and a house and concerts would, alone, content me?" and the man's intent face was suddenly illuminated.

"Not for a moment. There was something else into the bargain, but I was leaving that until I had got through with the rest," he said; and Eveline looked down as she answered, "It was very foolish of you."

Lyle thereupon suddenly became possessed of a disjointed fluency, and some time after he concluded Eveline said, "The something else was everything, and the whole bargain to me. I knew you were strong and steadfast, and couldn't resist the temptation of testing how much you would do for me. It was wicked vanity, but I wanted to be proud of you, and I suffered for it often and severely when I heard you were in deadly peril in that horrible land. What would anything else matter when I have you to care for me?"

More time passed, and they still stood near the cedar, when Eveline, who leaned upon his arm looking up at her companion, asked, "Would you be content to settle down in this country, Edward?"

"Isn't it a useless question?" answered Lyle. "I should be happy anywhere with you;" and Eveline smiled as she answered, "Of course it is. What else could a poor man say; but, sweetheart, might you not be happier in one place than another? I want the truth from you."

Lyle was silent a few moments. "If I sold my Western possessions I could settle here and be perfectly happy, even if at times I longed a little for the old vigorous life in the open air."

"That I knew," said Eveline. "Now, partly because I want to convince you how little I really care for what I demanded, and because at times I find myself hemmed in too, you must go back to Canada some day, and take me with you. There, I have made expiation."

"Do you really mean it?" asked the man; and Eveline looked up at him with pride in her eyes as she answered, "I do. If you had been smoothed down to the monotonous conventional polish I might never have cared for you, and you would probably not at a word from me have set out to bring back—not, as you express it, horses and houses and concerts from Africa—but proof of your loyalty. I want you to remain as you are—my unspoiled hero. Yes; I mean every word of it, and I am longing for the free life of the open, too."

Lyle's answer was expressed by an almost painful pressure of the arm within his own, and they went contentedly back to the house together, where Lucy smiled upon them wickedly, and Hilda almost overdid her air of indifference. "We wondered where you were, but you are excused," said the former. "The view from the lower end of the lawn is one of the finest in England, even when it is almost too dark to see it."

Clarence and Northop Markham arrived presently, and late that evening Lyle had an interview with the latter, who nodded approval as he said, "Miss Lonsdale agrees with me that it would be better for us to begin life at my own homestead across the sea. She need suffer no hard-

ship, and the new railroad will place us in close communication with two prosperous cities. You see, I have no profession except that of cattle raiser, and should make a very second-rate company director. We both of us cherish a respect for this country, but a cramped life of comparative idleness is all I should be good for here, and——"

"I think Eveline is wise," said Northop Markham. "You can trust her judgment, Lyle. Clarence would manage your interests in the new company by power of attorney, and transmit the dividends—they will be heavy—while Cummings is on the spot out there. The profits on the oil deal, too, should fill your place up with every feminine luxury. You will have a good wife, and you have won her fairly. I hope the happiness you deserve will fall to both of you."

Half-an-hour later, Eveline and Lyle strode slowly across the lawn towards the meadow path which led to Lyle's brother's house. The stars were bright above them, the night breeze fresh and cool, and the man felt the world was very pleasant as he said—

"It is almost too good to credit after stewing in pestilential Africa, and I could almost believe myself dreaming. Fancy this continuing indefinitely."

Before Eveline could answer Lucy Markham's voice reached them from the porch. "He hasn't gone yet, daddy, and this is really getting dreadful. He promises to be worse than Clarence. You must positively get them settled off-hand, or I shall have to take the portable summer-house and camp out on the moor. I daren't go anywhere without singing for fear of disconcerting the other pair."

Northop Markham's laughter followed, and Lyle bent his head towards his blushing companion. "Miss Lucille is painfully outspoken, even for her age—but now you have promised I hear the wind in the cedars calling us West," he said.

THE END

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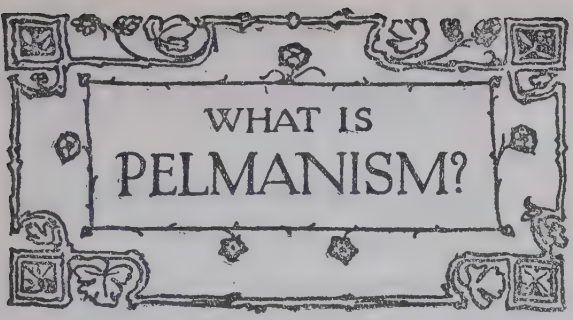
WHAT IS
PELMANISM?

# "I'd like to take up Pelmanism, but—"

## *Some Doubts Dispelled*

THE very prominence which Pelmanism has attained during recent years forms the basis of a doubt which exists in the minds of many people. A business girl said to me only the other day, "I'd like to take up Pelmanism, but it's so much advertised that I wonder whether there is not a certain amount of quackery about it."

The association of extensive advertising with quackery is a relic of long years ago, but it is strange how it persists. I was rather surprised, nevertheless, to hear this business woman express the doubt, for she is a marked success in her sphere of work, with a keen, analytical mind.

Inquiry revealed the fact that she had read only one or two of the Pelman announcements closely, though she had glanced in a half-interested way at scores of them. I then divulged that I was a Pelmanist, and immediately a regular machine-gun fire of questions was opened upon me. Was there anything in Pelmanism? Was it free from quackery?

### Is the Case Overstated?

Did not the advertisements overstate the case? Wasn't the most made of the successes attained by a few students, while the many secured no benefit worth speaking of? To all of which I replied by two further questions: Was it conceivable that over 400,000 people would voluntarily adopt Pelmanism unless they were convinced that they would gain in some way from the study? Would so many of the leaders of thought, including prominent educationists, influential business men, and well-known authors and editors, publicly state their unbounded faith in Pelmanism if it were not capable of withstanding the most searching investigation?

### Trebled My Income.

These broadsides took instant effect, and I followed up my advantage by mentioning some of the results Pelmanism had achieved in my own case: vast improvement in memory; keener perceptions; realisation of dormant possibilities; consciousness of greater power; appreciation of the beauties of poetry; easier concentration. I reserved for my final shots the two most practical outcomes of my Pelmanistic studies.

The first of these had a telling effect, for this would-be Pelmanist was full of ambitious plans in business. I told her that during the past two years my earnings had more than trebled, in spite of many difficulties and setbacks, and that to Pelmanism was due the major part of the credit for this financial improvement. The other result was the consummation of an ambitious plan which I had often contemplated, but which, until I had become a Pelmanist, I honestly believed to be something unattainable.

This conversation suggested to me that others are probably deterred from taking up Pelmanism by a variety of "buts," each of which could be disposed of in a minute or two if only it were possible to meet the doubters face to face.

For instance, at various times friends of mine have said: "But I'm not enough of a student to tackle Pelmanism. I could never sit and pore over books and lessons, even if I could find the time." Here we have a dual objection: (1) Pelmanism is thought to be hard to study, and (2) no time can be found for it. Let us deal with the second part of this objection first.

The Pelman Course requires from thirty to sixty minutes daily for a period of about three or four months. Many of the exercises can be practised at odd moments—when walking through the streets, while waiting in a friend's office or home, during train or bus rides, and so on. Other parts of the study can be done at home or at the office without seriously encroaching on one's time for other matters. The main fact to be borne in mind is that all of us can find or make time to do these things which really interest us. And Pelmanism is one of those things. Which brings me to the first part of the objection we are rebutting. Pelmanism is as unlike ordinary formal studies as anything can well be.

The very first lesson reveals the fascination of Pelmanism, and this fascination becomes intensified with each succeeding "little grey book." Of course, you cannot get the most out of Pelmanism unless you are prepared to follow the training closely. But any Pelmanist will tell you that there is no difficulty in doing this. Pelmanism itself provides whatever incentive may be needed by those who by nature are disinclined to apply themselves to study.

## Brain Power.

A frequent contention of the anti-Pelmanists (for there are people who, without knowing what Pelmanism is, are opposed to it) is that it is impossible to make brains grow where none exist. By which they apparently mean that Pelmanism will not make wise men of dullards. Let me say that, so far as I know, the Pelman Institute has never claimed to be able to perform miracles, though tens of thousands of its members would unhesitatingly declare it had done so in their cases. An ordinary school education is the only foundation necessary to enable any woman or man to become a successful Pelmanist.

In fact, it might be said with a great deal of truth that Pelmanism can be of far more benefit to those of comparatively few scholastic attainments than to those who have been endowed with a more liberal education. To be deterred from taking up Pelmanism

because it is thought that only "brainy" people can make profitable use of it is to allow oneself to be influenced by an inaccurate or incomplete idea of what Pelmanism is and does.

## Eminent Men on Pelmanism.

On another occasion I was told that Pelmanism was chiefly a matter of very clever advertising, and that the merits of the system existed almost entirely in the imagination of the man responsible for the Pelman announcements. This critic, however, could not explain how it was that men of the calibre of Admiral Lord Beresford, General Sir O'Moore Creagh, V.C., Lieut.-Gen. Sir R. S. S. Baden-Powell, Sir Arthur Quiller Couch, Sir Wm. Robertson Nicoll, Sir H. Rider Haggard, Mr. T. P. O'Connor, M.P., Mr. George R. Sims, Mr. Max Pemberton, and many others came to write such glowing tributes to this Course in Mind and Memory Training.

He agreed that their testimony was unimpeachable, and admitted (rather reluctantly, I thought) that perhaps there was more in Pelmanism than he had supposed. It is the declared opinion of hundreds of Pelmanists that the announcements of the Institute err distinctly on the side of moderation. Although the advertisements tell nothing but the truth, they do not tell all the truth, on the principle, I take it, that enough is as good as a feast.

Then there's the man who says: "Yes, Pelmanism is no doubt all right for the brain-worker or student, but I'm a mechanic"—or a farmer, a grocer, a policeman, a telegraphist, a rate collector, as the case may be. Just because some people reach much greater success than others in these vocations is proof that there is scope for keen workers in these and similar fields.

## Pelmanism for Industrial Workers.

A Pelman-trained mind will show the industrial worker, for instance, in which direction advancement lies, and what steps to take to attain the goal towards which he is striving.

Thousands of letters from Pelmanists have been published at various times, demonstrating in unmistakable manner the great benefit which anyone can derive from the Course. A coalminer declares Pelmanism to be very useful to him in his work; a munition worker gives Pelmanism direct credit for his ability to design a patent pile; a Manchester bleacher says he never spent money to better advantage than on the Course. These instances could be multiplied almost indefinitely. The man or woman who hesitates to adopt Pelmanism through a mistaken notion that it is useful only to the business and professional classes is neglecting the supreme opportunity of his or her life.

*Full particulars of the Pelman Course are given in "Mind and Memory," which also contains a complete descriptive Synopsis of the 12 lessons. A copy of this interesting booklet, together with a full reprint of TRUTH'S famous Report on the work of the Pelman Institute, and particulars showing how you can secure the complete Course at a reduced fee, may be obtained gratis and post free by any reader who applies to The Pelman Institute, D, Pelman House, Bloomsbury Street, London, W.C. 1.*